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A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF SENIOR LEADER EXPERIENCES
AND PERCEPTIONS OF UNPLANNED TURNOVER

by

JARRAD LEE HINOJOSA

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the University of the Incarnate Word
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF THE INCARNATE WORD

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My very long journey through this educational endeavor was influenced and aided by the support, encouragement, and love of many people. I am profoundly grateful to my family, friends, and colleagues, many of whom might not realize how influential they have been in this process.

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Jarrad Lee Hinojosa

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my late father Larry who would have been impressed at this educational achievement. You always tried to make my dreams come true and were always there for advice and counsel when I really needed it.

A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF SENIOR LEADER EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF UNPLANNED TURNOVER

Jarrad Lee Hinojosa, PhD

University of the Incarnate Word, 2019

This study focused on the persistent problem facing organizational leaders of voluntary turnover of professional staffs. The problem of turnover in general has been studied for decades from the perspective of those who left the organization. What is lacking in the body of research is an understanding, from the perspective of senior management, of why professionals abruptly leave the organization (Waldman, Carter, & Hom, 2015). The purpose of this exploratory qualitative research is to examine the phenomenon of sometimes abrupt, voluntary turnover of professionals in organizations from the perspective of organizational leaders. A more contemporary, less objective evolution of traditional grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory, was utilized which still retains the emergent, iterative process of traditional grounded theory but instead allows for and promotes the inclusion of the researcher's point of view (Charmaz, 2014). Interview and transcription data were analyzed using open coding, focused coding, memoing, constant comparative analysis, and theoretical sampling. The proposed grounded theory that emerged from the responses of leader participants is described as a repeating cycle of leader experiences associated with the unplanned loss of a valuable employee. This cycle of leader experience (sequence) is composed of major phases of Trust, Shock, and Regret. Simultaneous to the Trust-Shock-Regret cycle are situational conditions related to the unplanned loss: high leader communication, 'warning signs', and management disconnect. This study adds a new dimension to our understanding about the role of leaders in unplanned turnover, from the context of experienced, senior-level organizational leaders of professional employees.

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Chapter I: Leadership and Unplanned Turnover

Context and Overview

The issue of persistent and growing voluntary turnover of professional staff is a constant obstacle facing leaders in today's competitive economy. The acquisition, use, and retention of people with strategic knowledge forms the core of competitive advantage for organizations today (Schmitt, Borzillo, & Probst, 2011). Organizational knowledge and overall competency results from a synthesis of its "physical assets" and its unique, "intangible assets" that are comprised of human skills and organizational know-how (Bontis, 1999). Research indicates that a firm's tacit knowledge, or experience-based know-how, is more valuable in terms of promoting competitive advantage than its more imitable explicit knowledge (Nissen, 2006), so the need for management to understand and retain its organizational knowledge (i.e., its key people) is critical to survival in the current knowledge-based economy (Schmitt et al., 2012). Traditional, historical approaches to assessing the value of capital (assets) within an organization were associated with its tangible assets such machinery and equipment. In modern organizations, there is a new paradigm for the classification of "assets" that is less dependent on physical, tangible capital (Castaneda & Toulson, 2013). More specifically, organizational leaders today operate in complex environments where often their best knowledge resources are their people, who can be referred to as human intellectual capital (IC). IC has been defined as an intangible, strategic asset of an organization that creates value and drives performance (Marr, Schiuma, & Neely, 2004), as a management technology (Mouritsen, 1998), and as a form of intangible capital at the core of a company's resources that must be carefully managed as any other asset (Edvinsson, 1997; Lynn, 1998). Intellectual capital varies greatly in its depth and complexity and is thought to represent the organization's source of future viability (Kelloway & Barling, 2000) because the era of dominant reliance on machinery or crops, for example, is greatly reduced. In terms of

“human capital” it is widely recognized that highly educated, productive people are the most critical resource to economic and social growth (Yigitcanlar, Tan, & Baum, 2007). Associated mostly with value creation rather than simply a component of the organizations overall value (known as valuation), IC is critical to the running of the organization, and as such, should be protected, utilized, and respected as much or more than physical assets (Alcaniz, Gomez-Bezares, & Roslender, 2011).

One of the key components of intellectual capital is a class of professional employee referred to as a “knowledge worker” (KW)—distinguished generally from a “manual” or “task” worker, and analogous to blue-collar and white-collar delineations (Drucker, 1994). Retaining these knowledge workers is critical and it should be a primary objective of any organization and its leaders because keeping them means keeping your organization at its intellectual best (Benson & Brown, 2007; Edvinsson & Malone, 1997). In our present “information era” the KW can be viewed as possibly the most important factor in how well information is processed (Lee & Maurer, 1997) because they add value to a firm—not because of their labor or job history—but because of what they know. Tushman and O’Reilly (2002) explain how KWs will determine which organizations become “stars” and which will decline in the 21st century. Specifically, they argue that the present landscape of competitiveness fueled by the intellectual capital of your organization has grown immensely in recent decades. It is widely acknowledged in the literature that this “intellectual” component of businesses has grown significantly in the last few decades, and, will continue to grow as businesses evolve away from labor-intensive operations and toward knowledge and service-based enterprises (Bontis, 1999; Kelloway & Barling, 2000; Schmitt et al., 2011). It is therefore imperative that organizational leaders remain cognizant of the value of their knowledge resources and vigilantly safeguard unnecessary loss of these precious resources.

One of the toughest realities that businesses are dealing with is the fact that knowledge worker turnover can be extremely harmful to an organization (Guidice, Heames, & Wang, 2009) and that reemploying these professional vacancies can be extraordinarily costly—reaching levels as much as 200% of the annual salary of the position being filled when you factor in recruitment and training costs (Allen, Bryant, & Vardaman, 2010; Cascio, 2006). As with seasoned employees, when they leave they take with them tremendously valuable expertise, skill, trade secrets and more, and unless a proper knowledge management protocol is in place, transfer of specialized knowledge and tacit assumptions will be lost (Joe, Yoong, & Patel, 2013). Adding to the complexity of retaining knowledge, a “brain drain” phenomenon has begun and will continue for decades as talented baby boomers retire and create enormous knowledge gaps in their wake (Kuhl, 2014).

This reality and subsequent “war for talent” has organizations facing enormous challenges in the acquisition and retention of highly skilled labor that can fill knowledge voids. Another important consideration is that the millennial generation, born around 1979 to 1994, currently fuels the growth and the future of human capital that will be vacated by baby boomers. Organizations are being met with a modern, younger, skilled labor pool that is very different in its requirements and expectations of employers, and whose satisfaction is derived from entirely new criteria (Kuhl, 2014). As he explains, these millennials value autonomy, leveraging technology to provide flexibility in work environments, and less hierarchy in decisions to name a few examples.

Important for leaders to be aware of is that not all turnover is bad for an organization, and in fact, turnover is quite often beneficial and necessary. Voluntary turnover, often sub-categorized as functional and dysfunctional (Dalton, Todor, & Krackhardt, 1982), can also an

opportunity to bring in new talent, data, industry expertise, and otherwise reinvigorate the human capital situation. Comparably, the loss of problematic, low-performing, and disengaged employees (functional turnover) is an obvious benefit to the organization because this attitude and work ethic can be contagious to others. Using knowledge workers as an example, the decision to leave could benefit them as well in the sense that their skill sets and development needs had grown beyond the capability and utility of the organization. Losing a high performer like this through voluntary separation is an example of dysfunctional turnover.

Based on all of these tough realities, it seems wise for organizational leaders to make careful decisions about why a particular highly skilled individual is the best selection for the role, and, why “perfect fit” is of paramount importance even if it means taking longer in the selection process. If this is done with the utmost rigor and honesty, it seems logical that an organization stands a better chance of retaining key intellectual staff and maintaining intellectual capital which, as has been established, is critical to competitive advantage.

Statement of the Problem

Having performed over the last 15 years in several skilled, professional (knowledge worker) roles in varying industries, I have directly observed and experienced negative working conditions that contributed to my perceptions of management disconnect and general lack of concern. These negative conditions were as follows:

1. Low job satisfaction and morale, specifically in the departments where I worked at the professional analyst level with peers of the same educational background. These corporate departments were Investment and Finance units that was under constant pressure for analysis and reporting to senior management. The term “pressure cooker” is often used to describe these type of work environments where the only concern

- appeared to be the analysis needed “at the moment” with essentially no regard for personal constraints outside of work.
2. Low productivity and disengagement when the perception of management was very negative, sometimes my peers would avoid duties to escape the overload of work. Although these employees were well-educated professionals that had significant responsibility for deliverables, they were sometimes reduced to acting immaturely in ways that you’d never expect, such as avoiding assignments, taking extended breaks, or doing substandard work when they could get away with it.
 3. Disrespect and disparagement from leadership toward professional staff. This was often called “analyst abuse” by my peers in the departments I worked in. I experienced many situations where management was pressured to deliver on a project or analysis, which translated to unreasonable deadlines and expectations for lower level employees.
 4. Low organizational commitment by staff, that is, premature, voluntary turnover (flight risk and job abandonment). This was unfortunately, all-too-often, the by-product resulting from some of the above conditions. It was this observation that angered me the most as it represented to most costly and unnecessary waste of human resources because it appeared entirely avoidable. My perception was that management was unaware of the negative environment which was intriguing to me.

Indeed, all these observations relate to a diminished work environment that could contribute to a significantly underperforming organization because of employee unhappiness. The focus of this research, however, is primarily directed on Observation 4 relating to organizational commitment and premature, voluntary turnover by professional staff. I’ve

mentioned several other negative experiences here because I want to offer a deeper, broader contextual picture of my perceptions of management deficiencies based on these personal experiences. As will be discussed in the methodology section, my reality is constructed based on these experiences, and will be a valuable lens through which I interpret responses from leaders.

My experience witnessing several voluntary departures by professional staff across several industries and several organizations was the genesis of this endeavor. Back then, I had many discussions with professional colleagues about job dissatisfaction and confusion about leader expectations during particularly stressful times. These same colleagues seemed always ready or looking to make a move to another department or leave the company all together. Many of them eventually quit. The impression then was that our department leadership was not connected, not informed, and not concerned with our needs. After having invested so much into my education and career, working in corporate departments with colleagues that were also individual contributors, I was disappointed, angry, and curious about how these situations come to be. Leaders are supposed to be the “people experts” looking out for your best interest, trying to develop you and help your career, or so I naively thought. While it was not always a bad environment, I look back at these difficult times with same questions about how leaders in our organization seemed so blind to how unhappy their professional teams were. We’d hear anecdotally from friends in other companies that this was common, and that strong egos are rampant in these competitive working conditions.

As stated previously, turnover can be beneficial to the individual employee, leader, and organization alike for several reasons, such as when a poor performer leaves and allows for a replacement with new or better skills. However, the phenomenon in focus here is the abrupt and costly void created when a valuable individual contributor leaves an organization, sometimes

after a brief employment term, following an extensive and lengthy hiring process. The magnitude of the loss of a short-term employee would not necessarily be as great for the organization as for that of a long-term contributor. That said, what is also troubling is the abrupt loss of talented individuals who were eagerly recruited, put through extensive training, and left to flounder in their roles essentially to the point of discouragement and frustration.

The literature is consistent with my observations of these phenomena in professional settings. The highly transient nature of professional staff today is supported largely by increasingly educated labor pools which engender an increased sense of entitlement, coupled with a diminished sense of loyalty to employers. As business entities have engaged in downsizing strategies to become as lean as possible in recent decades, coupled with the high mobility inherent in well-educated staffs, the phenomenon of “career employees” is now more an exception rather than the rule (Galunic & Anderson, 2000; Niehoff, Moorman, Blakely, & Fuller, 2001).

The role of senior leaders in this this phenomenon is at the core of the research because the level of leadership awareness about satisfaction conditions among professional staff is very important. As will be discussed later in this study, leaders that take the time to understand the needs of their workforce benefit from better relationships, loyalty, and performance for the organization.

Although the natural inclination might be to research the problems and experiences of dissatisfied professionals, there is already abundant literature from the perspective of dissatisfied professional staff. This literature addresses commitment, dissatisfaction, productivity, engagement, and alienation, to name a few topics. What is really lacking in the body of research is an understanding of why professionals leave the organizations from the perspective of an

organization's leadership, specifically senior management that has been subject to the negative occurrences of sudden voluntary turnover (Waldman, Carter, & Hom, 2015). A thorough review of multiple academic databases on the topics of leaders, leadership, turnover, attrition, and retention yields abundant research that is highly restricted to teachers and nurses. There exists a conspicuous lack of academic research on leader "perceptions and experiences" on these topics, and essentially nothing on the topic from the context of business entities or other corporate-type organizations. As such, there is a research gap in the understanding of leadership perceptions and understanding about what role—if any—they may have in these situations where valuable human resources leave the organization too soon. Further, what are organizations failing to learn from the exit process itself, and just as critical, how is the exit process informing the retention process.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative research was to examine the phenomenon of sometimes abrupt, voluntary turnover of professionals in organizations from the perspective of organizational leaders. The major distinction of this research is that I was not seeking understanding and perspective from the individuals that left the organization, but rather from leaders who have experienced unforeseen turnover in their respective organizations. This study is about understanding how leaders view voluntary turnover of their subordinates through their personal experiences with employee loss, their attitudes, and overall awareness of employee environments. I took this approach to better understand possible disparities between management's presumed intent of having an engaged, committed, and productive staff and the reality of the conditions that lead to unplanned separation. In addition, this research will hopefully enhance the understanding of why leaders are sometimes perceived as unaware or indifferent when employees leave the organization because of dissatisfaction. Expanding awareness of turnover among organizational leaders should help prevent the multitudes of

unnecessary, voluntary job separations which often seriously impair an organization's optimal state.

Research Questions

The following research questions ultimately guided my study:

1. How do leaders perceive and the departure or separation of critical personnel?
2. To what extent are leaders concerned about why skilled personnel leave?
3. What role have leaders played in promoting job satisfaction, engagement, and commitment to the organization of departed personnel?

In my initial framing I asked these and two additional questions that were focused on the extent to which leaders should be responsible or accountable for the departure or separation of critical personnel, including their participation in off-boarding processes. During the data-collection phase, I simplified to allow better focus key areas of the study. This adaptation was consistent with the emergent methodological approach detailed in the study.

Significance of the Study

Ultimately, the goal of this research was to decrease the unnecessary loss of talent and waste of organizational resources that result from highly skilled employees terminating the relationship with the organization prematurely. I wanted to understand leaders' awareness of and concern for the contributing factors that lead to unplanned turnover that plagues so many organizations. This has more important applicability in larger firms that are publicly owned because the emphasis is on maximizing shareholder value. Avoiding conditions that promote voluntary turnover could profoundly change the way leaders run organizations, and likewise, improve the attitudes and perceptions of our educated workforce. By focusing this research on perceptions about skilled professionals in particular, I aimed to address what is established as the costliest form of human and intellectual capital that a firm can lose.

The literature on the above-listed issues has underscored the need for exploration of the possible misunderstandings or misinterpretations that leaders may bear which may or may not contribute to a degraded work environment. This study will contribute to the greater body of research on unplanned employee turnover and separation, as well as leadership in general.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

The purpose of this research was to understand organizational leaders' perceptions and awareness of factors impacting employee separation and satisfaction in organizations. As detailed later in the study, a grounded theory methodology traditionally advocates for a very limited review of the literature before gathering data to avoid any introduction of preconceived concepts (Alemu, Stevens, Ross, & Chandler, 2017). This study however utilizes are more recent evolution of traditional grounded theory known as constructivist grounded theory, which fully acknowledges the practical benefits of exposure to extant literature because it helps to expose gaps in current research (Charmaz, 2014). As such, this literature review is focused on leaders and the importance of knowledge in organizations, the implications of loss of talent, and some of the theoretical underpinnings that may illuminate reasons for employee dissatisfaction.

Why Retention is Critical

Organizational knowledge, in all its forms, lies at the core of an organization's strength and its ability to achieve competitive advantage (Figure 1) (Hitt, Biermant, Shimizu, & Kochhar, 2001). Among the starkest realities facing leaders is the fact that the current knowledge economy requires organizations to constantly learn, meaning that knowledge must be harnessed, developed and retained in order for an organization to survive. Inherent in the process of becoming a "learning organization" is the careful and strategic use of its resources—both human and physical assets, which can in most instances be delineated as tangible and intangible in nature (Bontis, 1999). As companies shifted away from primarily manufacturing and production type industries to more service and knowledge-based industries, we began to see a greater delineation between educated and less-educated workers as increasing levels of formal knowledge became a necessity for a business to maintain competitive advantage. This shift in the

landscape of corporate America has forced leaders to refocus on human assets and skills, thus fueling a more competitive working environment.

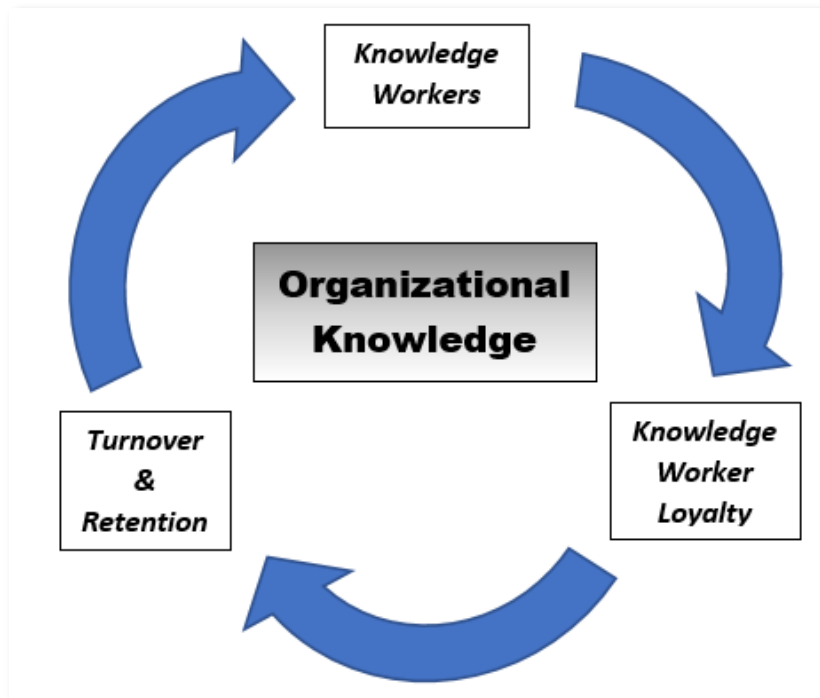


Figure 1. Organizational knowledge.

While much of an organization's knowledge can be stored in physical components, the true source of unique knowledge and thus competitive advantage is through the knowledge of its people (Hitt et al., 2001; Llopis & Foss, 2015). This is consistent with the resourced based view of the firm which posits that the unique interplay of heterogeneous, non-imitable resources is the key to its strategic and competitive ability (Barney, 1991). An even broader extension of the resource-based view is the knowledge-based view of the firm suggesting that knowledge of all types is the most critical productive resource and must be given most of a firm's attention (Grant, 1997). A firm's own survivability may hinge on its ability to recognize the organizational knowledge that it possesses (Kelloway & Barling, 2000).

A firm's human assets are the greatest repositories of specific knowledge which allows for individual and group analysis which in turn creates unique advantage. Recognizing the paramount importance of this human capital is a challenge for leaders today as they juggle competing priorities that often shift focus away from individual talent. Such key individual contributors within an organization who utilize elevated skill sets and specific proficiencies are often referred to in the literature as knowledge workers.

The knowledge worker (KW) first defined and distinguished in mid-20th century management literature is an individual who is commonly referred to as a “professional” and whom utilizes formally acquired knowledge and skills in their occupation. In 1959, Peter Drucker—a seminal author on knowledge workers, succinctly described them in his book *Landmarks of Tomorrow* as anyone who makes a living at creating or using (synthesizing) knowledge (Drucker, 1959). In this context, knowledge workers would typically acquire “formal” training in a postsecondary educational setting and then synthesize their learning in an occupational role that ostensibly requires an advanced level of education. Although it can be argued that most everyone uses some form of knowledge to execute tasks, Hammer, Leonard, and Davenport (2004) note a distinction that lower-level so-called knowledge workers would use knowledge more than create it, and they would have less discretion on how to employ knowledge than their much more experienced and expert KW counterparts. Their nonroutine work is distinguished from routine work in the way that it is variable, interdependent, and dynamic (Benson & Brown, 2007). The knowledge worker represents that class of employee whose tasks and roles are loosely defined, whom brings a “portable” skill set to the organization, is given much autonomy, and whose productivity is largely difficult to measure objectively. As Drucker (1999) indicates, it is not manual workers but rather knowledge workers (and their productivity)

that have been called the single most valuable asset to a 21st-century organization of any kind. Comprising an astounding 40% of the US work force by some estimates, KWs are the heart of innovation of any organization and thus hold the key to growth and sustainability (Davenport, Thomas, & Cantrell, 2002; Drucker, 1999). Knowledge is now such a critical resource in today's economy that an undeniable transformation has occurred in employee-employer relationships because the KWs own the tools of production (Drucker, 1994).

The highly competitive 21st century economies which are increasingly based in knowledge as capital are grappling with the need to rethink traditional leadership models. Being challenged are the antiquated top-down, hierarchical leadership structures because they leave too much knowledge on the table in the sense that workforces today are comprised of many individual contributors who possess valuable knowledge that can go un-utilized. With the highest levels of complexity, innovation and creativity that plague modern-era companies, new structures that encourage team-based and shared leadership structures will have the competitive edge (Pearce & Manz, 2005). The need of the modern organization to be highly efficient and flexible encourages a new leadership paradigm that recognizes that authoritarian leadership hampers the effectiveness of knowledge workers. Additionally, the historic notion of the preference for a charismatic or transformational leader at the top is being challenged because this too fosters a top-down, authoritarian approach which somewhat ignores the highly skilled workforces of today (Pearce & Manz, 2005).

Another important consideration for organizational leaders is the massive accumulation of highly skilled workers in the labor pool today. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), the number of people employed that currently hold at least a bachelor's degree in 2015 was an astounding 50.8 million people, while the total number of employed persons in

occupations classified as Management, Professional, and related was 58 million. Further, as of 2013, one third of jobs were in occupations that required at least some level of postsecondary education. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects (Figure 2) that occupations typically requiring a master's degree for entry will grow at the fastest rate from 2010 to 2020, while the slowest growth would be those jobs requiring only a high school diploma.

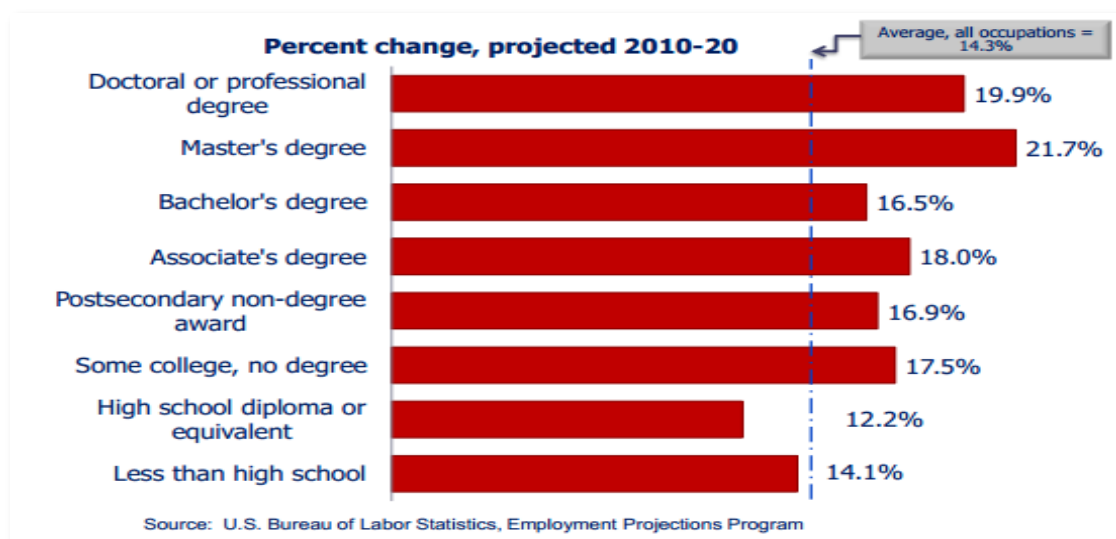


Figure 2. Projections of degree attainment.

The implication for leaders is that although the inherent benefits of an increasingly educated workforce might predict benefits for organizational knowledge, this increasingly competitive labor pool could now be more difficult to satisfy and thus retain in the organization.

Impact of Turnover

A substantial challenge to organizational leaders is avoiding voluntary turnover because often their brightest employees are attractive to other firms. Knowledge-intensive firms need to keep key contributors engaged and committed to their work and to their employers to avoid costs associated with attracting and replacing them. Many factors contribute to this costly and

damaging problem of voluntary turnover which is employee-initiated; this differs from involuntary turnover which is organization initiated such as when there is major restructuring (Hom, Mitchell, Lee, & Griffeth, 2012). Voluntary turnover is typically associated with higher performing employees and it is thus costlier overall (Dalton et al., 1982). It is collectively assumed that voluntary turnover can present an organization with unnecessary challenges by way of intellectual and social costs, service disruption, reduced morale, and high training costs of replacement workers (Hausknecht, Trevor, & Howard, 2009). Estimates from a major staffing firm that supplies I/T professionals suggests that the average cost of replacing a professional who earns \$60,000 per year can easily be \$150,000 when you factor in the direct and indirect costs of the void. Firms must consider the costs to recruit new talent, but also the indirect costs of losing a valuable employee such as the loss of institutional knowledge, loss of training, reduced morale, etc. (JDA Professional Services, 2013). This real-world example supports the aforementioned literature (see Cascio) that suggested that replacement costs of a knowledge worker could be in excess of 100% their annual salary.

Much of the long history of research on turnover can be grouped into general categories of “push-to-leave,” “pull-to-leave” or “shock” forces that compel a person to either stay or leave an organization (Waldman et al., 2015), with skilled employees most often leaving if they are not happy or have a perception of diminished value to the firm. In our present knowledge-based economy, the consequences of failing to understand unnecessary turnover are higher than ever because organizations lose more with the absence of each skilled employee (Hancock, Allen, Bosco, McDaniel, & Pierce, 2011). In industries characterized by high skill levels and knowledge requirements, human and social capital losses can have tremendous costs verses industries where a less skilled workforce is employed because intra-organizational, free-flowing

communication and idea sharing among workers (social relationships) is extremely valuable (Shaw, Duffy, Johnson, & Lockhart, 2005).

Evidence suggests that several misconceptions are commonly held about turnover in general—its predictors and consequences that need to be understood. First, not all turnover is bad—a fact that applies universally whether it is knowledge workers or general workforce. As research suggests, some turnover is quite beneficial to an organization as it continually refreshes the labor force by eliminating bottom performers (Abelson & Baysinger, 1984), infuses new skills and creativity, opens up promotion opportunities, and potentially enhances diversity (Allen et al., 2010). Further, another common misconception is that employees quit because of pay which is actually a weak predictor. Rather, they suggest that key turnover predictors are more likely to be job satisfaction, organizational commitment, role conflict, work stress, and most especially withdrawal processes (Allen, et al., 2010). This underscores the need for leadership and management to be acutely aware of the satisfaction of their employees so that they will be less likely to begin considering leaving the job. This research, however, somewhat contradicts research specific to knowledge worker voluntary turnover which indicates that pay—coupled with job prospects is the top factor for resignation (Horwitz, Heng, & Quazi, 2003).

Research also indicates a negative relationship between turnover and organizational financial performance, further supporting the argument for prioritizing the needs of high-level employees in knowledge-intensive firms (Hancock et al., 2011). In another comprehensive meta-analysis of antecedents of turnover, several key factors were reevaluated for their effects on turnover (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). They concluded that work satisfaction continues to have the greatest predictive relationship to leaving a job, along with leader–member exchange and role clarity and conflict.

Important for leaders to be aware of is that professional turnover is higher than nonprofessional turnover (Horwitz, et al., 2003). This is likely a byproduct of the multiple characteristics defining a knowledge worker, for example, which ostensibly afford them more career options at their discretion. Logically, the greater the intelligence and talent of the employee, the more mobile they are when compared to lesser skilled groups (Abbasi & Hollman, 2000). As economic forces through downsizing etc. have all but eroded old paradigms of job security and employee loyalty, the inclination of educated professionals to be more opportunistic has flourished (Kinnear & Sutherland, 2000). Thusly, loyalty needs to be managed aggressively in knowledge intensive firms to avoid turnover and loss of critical intellectual capital (Alvesson, 2000). It is suggested that key factors in retention of KWs include attractive compensation and bonuses, challenging and flexible work environments, and opportunities for growth (Horwitz, et al., 2003).

Further research on organizational commitment and the specific needs of highly skilled workers has yielded even more determinants that support and sometimes conflict with other research. Despres and Hiltrop (1995) suggested that KW loyalty is actually to peers and professions rather than the organization, and, that KWs have a strong need to learn from and interact with professional colleagues. This is supported by other research suggesting that knowledge workers, for example, view a business's values as subordinate to their own, therefore assigning loyalty to multiple groups within the organization rather than to the organization itself (Reichers, 1985). In terms of satisfiers, motivation, and needs of the KWs, management theorists such as Herzberg (1959) maintained that the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators such as achievement, recognition, responsibility, and advancement form the core of needs of the worker. This classic view, however, in the context of KWs does not properly address the increased

ranking—in the modern setting—of the “less essential” satisfiers such personal growth and development as proposed by Herzberg (Wickens, 1995). Wickens (1995) further explains that older paradigms of job security and loyalty are being replaced by an employer’s commitment to the employee. Traditional retention schema that prioritize benefits of health care and pensions no longer hold the weight that they once did as determinants of organizational commitment (Kinnear & Sutherland, 2000).

Existing Theory Background

Although limited in scope in this chapter, several key theories have significant relevance to this topic in the way that leadership influences job satisfaction through the lenses of motivation, fairness and justice. These theoretical influences represent an initial, broader theoretical scope from the literature (Figure 3). The emergent nature of the constructivist grounded theory method essentially dictates that new knowledge gathered in the process of theory generation will direct further theoretical exploration (Charmaz, 2014). These additional theories, plus several from this literature review help form the new, expanded “interpretive theoretical framework” detailed in chapter 5.

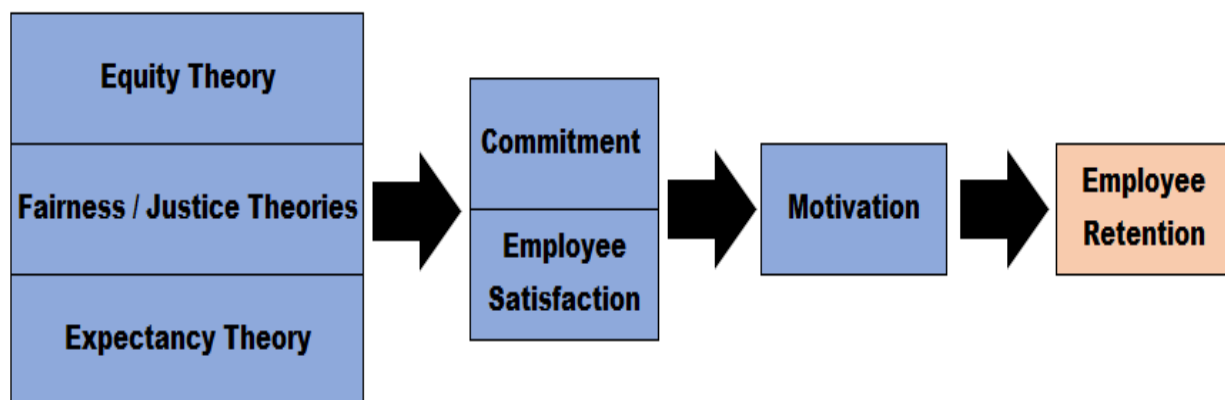


Figure 3. Diagram of initial theoretical scope.

Employee satisfaction and commitment in the context of motivation can be related to several observations and predictions outlined in established motivation theories that seek to address “fairness” perceptions in an organization. These perceptions can play a very large role in a person’s attitude and happiness within an organization and can ultimately be a major deciding factor in whether to stay committed to an organization.

Equity theory posits that within an organization, people will naturally seek an equal ratio of inputs-to-outcomes when comparing themselves to others (Adams, 1963). Further, it is suggested that when an inequity is perceived, individuals will constantly take action to correct the inequity by altering some or more of the components of the equation to reduce the “equity tension” that is occurring. Also, according to Adams, equity theory is primarily focused on equitable compensation rewards (pay outcomes) and indicates that individuals generally feel either overpaid or underpaid. Although the validity of Adam’s theory on inequity has been challenged regarding methodological processes that could lead to alternate interpretations of subjects’ perceptions of inequity (Goodman & Friedman, 1971), for the most part, equity theory is considered a strong foundation for analyzing employee perceptions of fairness within their organization. Additionally, assumptions and predictions according to equity theory on overpayment have been inconsistent as research indicates that moral development may be a strong moderator in equity perceptions (Vecchio, 1981). Equity sensitivity is another concept that research indicates may be a hugely important factor in equity perceptions because it suggests that all people have unique, individual preferences for what is perceived as equitable (Huseman, Hatfield, & Miles, 1987). Further, the concept of payment rewards in general may vary significantly by individual because some employees may value nonmonetary rewards such as job

titles or upgrades to working environments as factors that alter their equity perception (Greenberg, 1988).

As previously discussed, employee retention and commitment are critical to the successful maintenance of an organization's information capacity. According to equity theory, when equity tension exists, two of the major "corrective actions" that an employee will choose from are either to reduce their efforts and performance (inputs) or to leave the organization altogether. Having witnessed both of these actions in real-life working environments among professional knowledge workers, and from the abundant research on this type of turnover, it is evident how incredibly costly and damaging this outcome (behavior) can be on an organization. Of utmost importance is that leaders pay close attention to employee perceptions of fairness and justice in the workplace in order to better understand and address various attitudes.

Under the same context of motivation, as equity theory primarily focuses on fairness in terms of the "amount" of reward allocations (known also as distributive justice), more recent approaches may address overall perceptions of workplace fairness through a broader concept known as organizational justice. Essentially an expansion of equity theory, organizational justice is a highly subjective individual interpretation of overall fairness in the organization encompassing distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice (Greenberg, 1987). Of these three, the key additional component to the fairness interpretation is procedural justice because it focuses on the process of fairness in the workplace. In other words, it is extremely important to manage transparency of decision processes that affect the "why" and "how" of outcomes. This can be accomplished by providing clear explanations via open dialogue, being consistent in allocations, maintaining the perception of an unbiased approach to decisions, and establishing an appeal process (Leventhal, 1976). As issues arise with distributive justice

perceptions (e.g., pay cuts), or where it is otherwise lacking within an organization, procedural justice then becomes more important because it proffers the “why” explanations of outcomes that individuals desire (Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003). The third component of organizational justice, interactional justice, is a more recent addition to the body of research on fairness in the organization. It is generally concerned with the perceptions of dignity, respect, sensitivity and honesty when decisions are implemented. Interactional justice is more concerned with interpersonal relationships and perceptions about fairness applied between individuals such as supervisors and subordinates and thus can be a huge factor in overall job happiness and satisfaction. Although these three components of overall organizational justice are important, meta-analytic studies confirm that procedural justice is the best predictor of organizational commitment and job performance (Colquitt et al., 2013). Although there is much less evidence supporting interactional justice as a pivotal factor in organizational commitment, research indicates that high levels of both procedural and interactional justice are moderating factors in organizational commitment which is critical to knowledge creation within the organization (Thompson & Heron, 2005).

Expanding on the context of justice and fairness evaluations, social exchange theory (SET) has gained tremendous momentum in recent decades and has been positioned as the dominant lens through which to view justice effects (Colquitt et al., 2013; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Essentially, SET describes a social construct or paradigm whereby a series of interdependent interactions (exchanges) that are based on another’s actions generate obligations between entities, and whereby those exchanges can engender high-quality relationships (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). We as humans are constantly performing a subjective cost-benefit analysis that determines our willingness to continue in certain relationships (Emerson,

1976; Homans, 1958). We can view exchanges (reciprocal or negotiated) in terms of costs and rewards in order for individuals to assess pursuing interpersonal or organizational relationships. Organizations thus can be viewed as forums for transactions or exchange—as in the work-for-pay example where fairness perceptions will evolve (Randall, Cropanzano, Bormann, & Birjulin, 1999). Social exchange theory has become highly influential and has witnessed dramatic increases in research focus in several disciplines. Research indicates that fairness perceptions are associated with better work attitudes and higher performance (Konovsky, 2000).

Through an organizational performance lens, research indicates strongly that SET “relationships” evolve within the organization and can have profound effects on commitment, task performance, and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) which is understood as employee discretionary behaviors that are not formally required but go above and beyond to benefit the organization (Colquitt et al., 2013; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Organ, 1988). Also, the relational concept of perceived organizational support (POS) is introduced under SET framework and research indicates that high levels of POS correlate to reciprocal obligations of higher performance towards employers (Lynch, Eisenberger, & Armelli, 1999; Moorman, Blakely, & Niehoff, 1998). Further, research supports the outcome benefits of positive relationships with employers through better organizational commitment when POS is higher (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Meyer & Allen, 1997). Within the organizational justice realm, SET has also been shown to aid in the well-debated distinction between procedural and interactional justice suggesting that it is necessary to recognize the uniqueness of these two types because they predict different criteria (Cropanzano, Prehar, & Chen, 2002).

Another important theoretical concept, based in exchange theory, is psychological contract theory, which has major implications in organizational motivation and employee-

employer relationships. It is basically defined as the perceptions, assumptions, and beliefs between an employee and employer about the terms of reciprocal exchange for some future benefit for effort (Rousseau, 1989). Unlike formal, negotiated sets of obligations and rewards such as with a new employee contract, the psychological contract is an overarching, subjective understanding of the mutual obligations of the relationship that continue to evolve while in the organization. These reciprocal obligations are not necessarily the same as expectations because expectations refer to what an employee overtly expects to receive from an employer such as compensation or bonuses for performance. Under the same umbrella, psychological contract violation—known as PCV can be very deleterious to the employee-employer relationship and can completely erode trust, loyalty and commitment (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Originating with psychological contract breach (PCB)—and more severe than unmet expectations, PCV can be much more intense and illicit a stronger sense of betrayal, disappointment, and deception because this psychological contract is directly related to procedural and distributive justice (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). In terms of organizational commitment, PCB has been shown to be negatively associated for a variety of reasons because the emotional and psychological bond that employees have with their organization is damaged (Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2006). Further, an employee's positive evaluation of the state of their psychological contract (perception of psychological contract fulfillment) has been shown to be associated with increased well-being and reduced intention to leave (Van der Vaart, Linde, & Cockeran, 2013). This suggests that employers need to be wary of these informal agreements in order to retain employees. Recent research (Suazo, 2009) evaluated the possible mediating role that PCV plays in the relationship between PCB and work-related attitudes and behaviors such as commitment, intention to quit, and job performance. The findings support the negative association of PCB to work-related

behaviors and commitment but offers that when PCB leads to PCV there is less likelihood of this violation to diminish job performance.

Further supporting the concept of motivation in the workplace is one of the most widely pursued and accepted theories of workplace motivation—expectancy theory—which posits that an individual’s motivation is directly linked to an “appraisal” process that can lead to desired outcomes. First proposed by Victor Vroom in 1964, expectancy theory states that the level of our tendency to continue acting in certain way is predicated on our belief that (a) our efforts will lead to performance (expectancy), (b) that this performance will lead to rewards (instrumentality), and (c) that those rewards (outcomes) are important to us and in sync with our overarching goals (valence; Vroom, 1964).

In practical terms, expectancy theory can be conceptualized such as when a worker is motivated to exert extra effort if he or she believes that this will lead to increased performance (Step 1), and, that the performance will lead to reward (Step 2), and that this type of reward is meaningful to them and consistent with their personal goals. Expectancy theory’s basic premise is supported with decades of literature. Although not without its critics, studies validate the basic nature of the theory’s reliance on “perceptions” and “beliefs” held by an individual about a situation rather than actions or behavior (Van Eerde & Thierry, 1996). The theory has been shown to apply to training effectiveness and motivation (Mathieu, Tannenbaum, & Salas, 1992), and lost productivity and motivation in performance groups (Shepperd, 1993), the latter suggesting that employers should provide incentives and emphasize the indispensable nature of an individual’s contribution. This concept is helpful in understanding how or why an individual may exert only just enough effort in their job and not overachieve because in their mind, the ultimate outcome is not something that they hold in high regard or importance. No matter what

the employer feels is motivational, it really depends on what the individual's values or goals are and whether or not their efforts in will help them achieve these.

These theories are just a few that lend themselves to the understanding of why people in organizations behave in the manner that they do. These can apply to both leaders and subordinates of whom both are acting largely in their own self-interest, and sometimes not in the best interest of the organization. As motivations are unique to the individual, theoretical influences serve all parties in an organization and can help elucidate the complex interactions that are observed.

Observed phenomena.

Role conflict. Using the knowledge worker as a framework, task identification has been identified as one of the key factors in the determination and measurement of productivity. As such, within a workforce, it is logical that clarifying what tasks fall under the domain of task workers versus higher skilled workers is essential to improving overall satisfaction and value-added contributions. According to Drucker (1999) elimination of lower order routine, mundane tasks-type responsibilities from the scope of duties of knowledge workers is critical. Further, he stated that their productivity can drastically improve once these types of requirements no longer hamper their daily processes. Regarding retention of professional workers, role clarity and role conflict are critical factors that employers need to be aware of so that job expectations can be clearly defined and supported (Allen et al., 2010). "Expectations" should not be confused with defined "outputs" as this would conflict with the loosely defined roles that characterize knowledge workers as I have previously discussed.

It has been my own observation that in structured organizational environments, human resources are often added to departments without specific regard to discriminate needs of the

unit. Rather, an allocation is done for an arbitrary number of full-time professionals based on an ambiguous need by the department leaders, essentially creating a team of provisional “role-fillers” instead of people hired for their specific contribution capabilities based on their skills and qualifications. Even though there were explicit job duties vetted during the hiring process for the role based on standardized job descriptions, the reality was often employee disenchantment within months because they had very little to do, or more commonly, were asked to do tasks that were very different from those that should accompany their role. These tasks were often mundane and routine reporting-type duties that required minimal application of the knowledge, skills, and professional experience of the employee. This was not merely a low job satisfaction scenario, but an example of the real confusion arising from contrasting espoused professional duties and the reality of day-to-day activities.

Alienation. As stated previously, Peter Drucker was essentially the first to understand, study, and publish research on the classification and emergence of KWs in modern society. In some of his earlier works on the subject he discusses how important it is to understand the internal “conflict” that exists in this new breed of worker (Drucker, 1959). Given that so many KWs view themselves as “professionals” it can become very disenchanting for them working in social constructs that only view them as upgraded, better paid successors to skilled workers. Alienation in this context can be understood as a dissociative state where the employee feels disconnected and not valued within the organization (Nair & Vohra, 2010). As stated earlier, professional workers routinely seek autonomy and flexibility in their work environments, so structural factors such as centralization and formalization are thought to be problematic because knowledge workers for example resist a command-and-control work structure (Hammer et al., 2004; Horwitz et al., 2003). Nair and Vohra (2010) go on to suggest that factors of lack of

autonomy, absence of variety, lack of challenging and creative work, and most importantly meaninglessness of work are predictors of employee alienation. An alienated knowledge worker no longer adds value to the firm and would certainly leave a “knowledge void” if they left the organization.

Low productivity. Unlike the manual labor worker in a factory, or employee who has fairly routine or mundane daily tasks, the productivity of the professional class type employees is difficult to measure because “outputs” are fairly unclear. Whereas the work for a task-type employee is easy to define and measure based on output levels, the professional worker is naturally a more autonomous, self-defined role where productivity is really an abstract concept. While it is sometimes suggested that there is no generally accepted way to measure knowledge worker productivity (Ramirez & Nembhard, 2004), other research acknowledges that it is indeed possible, although difficult and requiring more innovative technique (Thomas & Baron, 1994). My experience as an imbedded professional has been that productivity at the professional, individual contributor level is extremely deteriorated when perceptions of value are attenuated.

Low morale. As a result of all of this happening to highly skilled, professional level employees and their frequent decisions to leave, I observed increased resentment and anger at the organizational leaders that seemingly allowed this all to happen. This acted to further diminish morale because of:

- Perception of wasted human and financial resources
- Perception of ignorance of leaders about why the employee left
- Additional workload imposed on collateral teams because of the new vacancy
- Increased sense of powerlessness that is fueled by these cycles

Middle management and senior leaders need to be tuned into the issues plaguing subordinate professional roles. This research sheds light on what they perceive to be the issues, motivations, and consequences of losing highly skilled employees and what they perceive to be the impact to the organization. As such, this literature review represents a concise, preliminary review of key concepts that focus on people, knowledge, and retention in organizations suggesting that leader awareness of these critical factors can have huge implications on the organization. Preserving organizational knowledge begins with leaders' recognizing its critical importance to performance by first understanding that an organizations' people are at the core of mission.

Chapter III: Methodology

Because the purpose of this research was to understand leader perceptions and experiences of voluntary turnover in organization, I needed to find a way to access those perceptions and experiences. Leader perceptions are formed through their real-life experiences of having experienced premature separation of key knowledge workers. Whether they have reflected on these critical incidents or not, their perceptions exist in the experience itself, which can be captured by reflecting upon and narrating the complex story behind each critical incident. Each leader's perceptions will be based on their unique experience, and thus there is no objective, singular, "true," answer to my research questions. Ontologically, this relativist philosophy dictates that reality is multiple and constructed from the lived experience of the leader.

Epistemologically, therefore, this study required a knowledge-seeking approach that can capture the detailed narrative form of multiple lived realities. Qualitative approaches are uniquely suited to do so. Since the purpose of this research was to understand leader perceptions and experiences of voluntary turnover in organizations, an explanatory qualitative strategy was employed. My goal was to understand organizational leaders' experiences, attitudes, and awareness about the conditions that could lead to professional employee separation.

Qualitative methods are best employed where the researcher seeks to elicit explanations by exploration of subjective understandings and interpretations of individuals' experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Since this research was fundamentally about understanding a social or human problem, and, ultimately investigating themes and proposing ideas in an emergent, inductive process, qualitative methods were the best choice (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative methods were the best choice because they allowed me to listen to the views of the

research participants, in this case, senior management perspectives on voluntary attrition through responses to subjective, open-ended questions in a natural interview setting.

Throughout this study the terms *leader*, *participant*, and *manager* are used somewhat interchangeably to refer to the senior role as opposed to their subordinates or employees. All my participants were senior-level leaders from organizations and would have acted in a managerial capacity over teams of professionals or individual professional subordinates.

Design

The research was focused on gathering unique viewpoints of experienced leaders in a format that is best suited for collection of human perspectives about shared experiences as leaders. This was accomplished by an explanatory, qualitative method that drew from a grounded theory (GT) approach. Because my goal was to understand the experience, interaction, and perception of senior leaders to aid in the development of a theory about such occurrences, an explanation grounded in rich, qualitative data also suggests a GT approach (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory is basically a systematic, iterative process that allowed me to collect and organize my interview data from various leaders into meaningful themes, and ultimately, use these to propose a larger theory of the overall experience. Grounded theory is a theory of extraction and *emergence* using open-ended strategies to arrive at proposition or theory (Charmaz, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). What is meant by emergence in the grounded theory method is a method whereby theory “reveals itself” and is “discovered” naturally during the systematic process of data analysis and reduction of codes. This new theory essentially is that which “transcends” and simplifies the data, and from an objective, positivist stance of traditional GT is viewed as the truth. As Strauss & Glaser assert, the rigor of the systematic process of traditional grounded theory is thought to reveal existing truth, independent of the researcher’s point of view and influence (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

A more contemporary evolution of grounded theory involves a less positivist, more interpretive, constructionist method. Known as constructivist grounded theory (CGT) this method still retains the emergent qualities of traditional grounded theory, but instead allows for and promotes the inclusion of the researcher's point of view (Charmaz, 2014). Note that describing traditional grounded theory as "positivist" or objective might seem counterintuitive, however, it has positivist epistemological pedigree because it is systematic, replicable, and rigorous (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). Constructivist grounded theory contends that the researcher is deeply embedded in the research rather than outside it, and, will alter the structure of the research based on social, interactional or other conditions that may arise (Charmaz, 2008). The beauty of CGT is that it makes me, the researcher, part of the data.

Although my goal was to develop a hypothesis about why the problems I've observed may occur, CGT fully acknowledges that my perspective, values, and experience matter in the reality I am constructing. This idea is known as *relativism* as a general research ontology because my construction of the truth is influenced by me directly, and essentially, not truly objective (Charmaz, 2014). The same is true of the reality and worldview of the participants in their recollections and stories. So, from the CGT methodological approach, full recognition is given to the fact that both researcher and the researched construct "multiple social realities" and cannot separate their experiences from their research or be objective about their data (Charmaz, 2014; Higginbottom, 2004).

My personal history highlights the appropriateness of constructivist grounded theory versus classic grounded theory because I as the researcher was already grounded in subjective, personal experiences related to topic. This can have profound implications in the ultimate "reality" or theory constructed because my participants are telling me their interpretation of loss

events as they perceive them, and I as the researcher interpreted them in a unique way based on my experience in similar settings. Thus, leader attitudes, judgement, and even facts about losing an employee reflected their reality of their experience, which is an expected and acceptable condition in the constructivist grounded theory approach.

Constructivist grounded theory, like traditional grounded theory, uses explication and emergence of data and is best suited for this research problem because it is an inductive, interactive, and comparative approach to inquiry that offers more open-ended strategies for conducting inquiry (Charmaz, 2014). In the more traditional grounded theory approach, the researcher would systematically develop data categories around a “core” phenomenon from which propositions about their interrelatedness can be discussed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The social constructivist approach to grounded theory research is more interpretive and *reflexive*, and relies more heavily on the researcher’s learning, perspective, and experience within the organizational setting. This means that in my interviews and my analysis, my intuition and interpretations of events based on my own experience in organizational leadership settings played a role in the development of my theory. It is consistent under a constructivist paradigm that my personal experience as a professional in corporate settings provides a meaningful link between me and the participants so that together we literally “co-construct” meaning as we go (Charmaz, 2014, Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I found it easy to identify with most of the participants in several regards. As they told me about their experiences with their respective organizations, I was constantly empathizing, understanding, recognizing, and giving affirmative reactions in our conversations. Thusly, the final proposed theory generated from the interviews in the study are essentially my constructions of the participants constructions. Said differently, the themes generated from my interview data and the subsequent proposed theory is reflecting the

interaction of my experiences and the participant experiences (Charmaz, 2008). Under this CGT method, there is derived meaning, but not a finding of one absolute truth as you might assume under the more objective, traditional grounded theory. The end product is a construction of multiple social realities.

Our meetings were very informal, friendly, and at the same time, efficient because the participants were prepared. They had received an introductory email that briefed them on the topic and offered some suggestive thought-starter questions. I did this to get them relaxed and hopefully reduce any anxiety about being interviewed. This also contributed to richer data because they had time to cogitate for a few days before about good examples related to unplanned turnover experiences. I much preferred this “prepped” approach in the interest of achieving better data as opposed to completely catching them off-guard with a battery of new questions.

It should be emphasized that the major distinction of this research is that I was not seeking to learn about departure from the perspective of those that left the organization, but rather perceptions, attitudes, and assumptions of senior leaders about this phenomenon of premature, voluntary turnover in organizations. This was done to better understand the dichotomy between leaders’ presumed intent of having an engaged, productive staff, and the reality of the situations that contribute to unplanned separation. This emergent method allowed for my deeply imbedded involvement in the evolution of the research as this process was iterative and I was constantly reviewing my data for emerging or new themes to explore. Thoughtful consideration was given to descriptions of my own personal experience of the phenomenon within organizations.

Participants and Data Collection

To best understand the experience of various leaders, I used a purposeful selection of 9 leader participants from various industries were selected to collect responses for about 10 prewritten, open-ended research questions in semistructured interviews (see Appendix A). The initial purposeful sample was only 4 participants and as the study progressed, further *theoretical samples* were selected consistent with the grounded theory methodology, eventually totaling 9 participants. These leaders from a variety of corporate and educational institutions were solicited for interviews. Some of these were professional acquaintances or referrals from associates in other industries, and all were from Director-level or higher ranks that have worked in corporate professional settings, and who have had professional, direct reports that may have been directly hired by them, although not necessarily. This significantly reduced barriers and access by eliminating gatekeepers and allowed for quicker access to these leaders.

Although there are no strict guidelines for sample size in grounded theory, a sample size appropriate for the research aims and depth of data collection is suggested (Charmaz, 2014). A much smaller sample size is appropriate and advocated for in qualitative studies that have (a) a narrow study focus, (b) strong theoretical underpinnings, (c) a high quality of dialogue with participants, and (d) participants of significant depth and breadth of experience (Charmaz 2014; Malterud, Siersema, & Guassora, 2015). I selected participants to learn about a very specific experience of losing a professional subordinate and employed intensive interviews that were influenced by shared experiences between participant and researcher. Additionally, the discussion and analysis of the grounded theory describes significant theoretical underpinnings of my proposed theory.

My participants had to be senior-level, tenured professional leaders that had experienced the sudden loss of a professional subordinate. Most of my participants were of the Vice President

rank in their respective organizations at some point in their career, and most had long, tenured careers spanning decades. The group of 9 final participants carried approximately 200 years of collective leadership experience—not just career experience—but in roles at the Director level or higher. A detailed table of the participants and their position, career bio, and loss event they referred to in their narratives is provided in chapter 4 (Table 1). A major criterion for selection was that they had managed (supervised) professional employees in their present or past management position and preferably had worked in several different organizations throughout their careers. The supervised employees that left abruptly were knowledge worker types as referenced in chapter 2, having specialized skills, education, or aptitudes in their respective organizations. It was also a high priority to select participants that were reflective, self-aware, and articulate in order to obtain the best data and enhance the credibility of the research overall. I contacted acquaintances as potential interviewees via email or via LinkedIn messaging with a brief introductory message to acquaint them with the project and ask if they were interested in being a participant. All of them enthusiastically accepted the invitation. I then provided the informed consent documentation per IRB requirements which outlined the purpose of the study, the interview structure, and the reasons why they were selected.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face or over the phone depending on individual circumstances, preferences, and geographic locations. Interview sites for face-to-face interviews were held at the preference of the participants and ranged from office locations to outdoors in a fresh air environment which allowed for minimal distractions and much privacy. The interview discussion was guided by the questions in my interview protocol but often digressed on tangential anecdotes about related events or personal opinions of the participants. One of the hallmarks of grounded theory inquiry is the use of intensive interviews which lend themselves

nicely to qualitative research. Intensive interviews are emergent, highly focused on a topic, and require that the participant have significant, first-hand experience in the topic which was certainly the case with my participant group (Charmaz, 2014). They all had significant depth and breadth of leadership experience over the course of years and decades. In addition, these interviews were structured on open-ended questions but allowed for the participants to lead and expand as much as they wanted with the researched intensely focused on the meaning behind their statements. Together with my experience on the topic of losing professional level employees, we engaged in spirited discussions about people, organizations, and best-practices which all added a richness to the data that I was looking for.

I asked the participants about specific examples in their experience of sudden loss of a subordinate in their respective organizations. The questions were designed to elicit responses that offered insight into their experience, awareness, attitude. The format of data collection was audio recordings on two simultaneous digital recording devices to prevent accidental loss of the interview data. Since these devices had the ability to directly transfer via USB cable to a PC, this was done immediately after the interviews onto my personal computer to preserve the data. At this point, I was able to upload as needed to Rev.com to order a transcription into a text document. In addition, and consistent with IRB protocol for protection of human research subjects, I completed the CITI Training program and provided documentation to this fact.

Data Analysis and Model Construction

Interview transcriptions were coded immediately after the interviews upon receipt of the transcription documents. Beginning with initial coding, I did line-by-line coding of the transcripts using gerunds as recommended for CGT interview data (Charmaz, 2014). I would underline and highlight relevant text in the transcript as reminders of topics or to indicate emphasis of a particularly interesting statement. Because it was not always clear in the transcript

data, during this initial coding process I would mark where the interview questions were being asked by me to the participant as “guide markers” throughout the transcript. Since I asked questions in a different order for some participants depending on the flow of the conversation, knowing the precise location of the questions was crucial to help me keep the data organized. Also, given the fluid and open-ended nature of the interviews, other impromptu questions came up during the interviews as I probed for more information or to clarify a point. For example, several times in the very conversational interviews, I would ask a pointed question from the protocol about the experience when losing an employee, and then segue into further questions about how that made them feel about loyalty.

My participants frequently provided unsolicited information by way of stories, examples, and opinions which I wanted to capture and note because these were valuable to me. Hearing personal tidbits and advice about topics supporting the main questions was extremely valuable to me because that was the point where understanding and truth really emerged. It was in these segues that participants demonstrated that they were relaxed and comfortable with me as the researcher. The connection between researcher and participant was strongest in these moments where I became most aware of the privilege it was for me to be learning directly from these experiences.

Thematic analysis of the transcriptions of interview responses was employed and accomplished by coding methods recommended for grounded theory approaches. As suggested in Saldana (2013), the coding process involves first and second cycle coding methods that initially allow for broad categorization segments which are subsequently used to develop axial boundaries or themes. These secondary “focused” codes were derived after my initial primary coding with gerunds. Since I have extensive familiarity with the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet

application from my professional background, my inclination with any data set is to organize raw data in a linear fashion for visual organization. Figure 4 is snapshot of the table I created in Excel to organize my primary and focused codes.

Viewing this data from left to right, following each transcript in order from beginning to end, I essentially laid out on a spreadsheet everything I had manually written down on the transcript. This spreadsheet became my official record of all coding and thematic development for constant comparative analysis. I first listed every primary code of every participant adjacent to the interview question where that code was generated in the transcription. Next to those initial codes (gerunds), I listed a focused if one was present in the transcript. After listing all the codes and organizing them in the table, I used a series of pivot tables to derive a clean list of 120 unique primary codes and 75 focused codes. These pivot tables also allowed me to tabulate the total frequency of each code throughout the entire body of transcription data. This frequency helped me tremendously because it illuminated the magnitude of certain codes based on how many times they emerged in the data. This helped me organize and focus my thoughts on themes that were emerging from the data where I had not noticed these themes in my manual, handwritten notes.

After the primary codes were listed, I generated focused codes from both my handwritten transcription notes and from my analytical memos. In addition to transcription data, analytical memos are highly advocated for in the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). These notes are from the researcher personally and are important reflections and responses to the questions that demonstrate critical thinking of the researcher in the research process. These analytical notes can also be coded in a similar manner to the responses from the participant. During this entire coding process and review of the transcriptions, I used analytical memos to help me develop

Interview Question	Primary Codes (gerunds)	Focused Codes	Notes - Response, Quote, Idea
Experience person leaving	assessing responsibility	fault assessment	leader personal reflection on role in situation
	assessing talent		individual contributor
	expecting professional courtesy	professional courtesy (S to L)	mutual respect / courtesy , goes both ways
	expressing frustration		caught off guard
	feeling helpless	warning signs	competitive environment
	leaving to run own business	highly specialized offer more flight risk	entrepreneurial spirit
	valuing employee as person		more loyalty expected from senior employees
Impact your opinion of person leaving	accepting reality of situation		still keep in touch
	acknowledging misjudgment	negative impact to personal opinion of person	went 180 degrees
	learning from mistakes		didn't know how much people talked (about pay)
	valuing autonomy		still keep in touch
Assess engagement or satisfaction	acknowledging fault		large span of control
	assessing problem	reactive management	management by exception
	Assuming happiness	no engagement feedback	unhappy are vocal, happy are quiet
	hearing about issues	warning signs	people think I don't know what's going on
	managing passively	managing from distance	I can just tell
	recognizing employee pain points	warning signs	voice of reason
	valuing morale / spirit		if not happy, they'll bolt

Figure 4. Coding table exhibit.

broader theoretical categories. It was from these memos that I first developed and refined my ideas about themes such as Autonomy, Warning Signs, Fairness, and Communication. These all eventually became core components used in the development of my grounded theory.

Throughout the analysis phase I employed the process of constant comparison whereby I continually reviewed and compare the codes for emergence of a cohesive theme or possible theory. This constant comparative analysis was essentially used through the entire grounded theory process beginning with the initial codes from the data. I compared compare codes to codes, codes to categories, and categories to categories, etc. to develop more abstract concepts and theories about what may be happening (Charmaz, 2014). For example, one of major thematic elements that finally emerged in the proposed grounded theory was the idea of a “sequence of events” for the way that events unfolded in similar sequences from leader to leader. By first comparing incidents to incident as they appeared in the transcripts (incidents being codes related to trust, shock, or regret) I would note that these tended to occur in the same order. With each new transcript, I would compare notes for this pattern in and examine the order of events that would further support a growing concept. Memos were created about the concept of “similar sequence” to organize my thoughts. Then, as subsequent transcript data became available, I would compare these concepts to more incidents to further substantiate the idea. As part of the grounded theory process, this was ongoing for development of every theme.

This analytical process during the Findings (chapter 4) ultimately led to the creation of an initial detailed model, explained more deeply in these chapters, referred to as a “leader experience sequence.” Through an iterative process, I used the emerging “steps” or stages in the above sequence of events to lay out a circular, repeating pattern or cycle. The transcript data was continually refined to include the addition of sub-themes as part of the major steps in the

sequence (Example: Autonomy and Fairness as part of the first major step, Trust). This initial sequence model was characterized as a “Faulty Process” and it concluded with “Learning Failure” as the final stage in the process. In chapter 5 discussions and analysis, this model would later be “optimized” whereby the final stage in the sequence was changed to reflect the recommended improvement of “leader directed retention.” This same basic model beginning with “Trust” was used throughout the study as a visual representation of how leaders experienced the loss of key employees.

Theoretical Sampling

Another central component of grounded theory research is theoretical sampling. This involves reviewing tentative conclusions from my data by seeking out additional information from interviewees, essentially helping me to refine categories in my emerging theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process essentially helped me decide where to probe for a deeper understanding of a topic that seemed to be relevant and critical to my initial theory ideas.

After my first four interviews, I began the coding and analysis process whereby general themes emerged. Memos were written and then further expanded upon until I had a better idea of where I wanted to follow up and probe deeper. For example, several general themes seemed to cluster together around the idea of “responsibility for the departures” which seemed like an appropriate avenue to pursue. To address this, I needed deeper insight and conceptual expansion from the participants. The focused themes of Shock, Warning Signs and Autonomy were emerging from the focused coding, so these served as the foundation to pursue follow up interviews with the first four participants followed by three new, additional participants. This second group of leaders was selected based on the same criteria as the first participants. I asked them most of the same initial questions from the first group, and then additional questions about

their perceptions of warning signs, how they regarded them, and what their notion of that would be in the context of employee satisfaction. I asked them about how they view autonomy of professional employees in general to hear how much or how little of a priority that was. In addition, during these follow up interviews I asked them about their thoughts on accountability of leader when an employee suddenly decides to leave.

These were the scripted interview questions; however, the conversational, emergent nature of these interviews sometimes incorporated one-off questions as well:

First group.

1. Can you think of a time when you were surprised that a professional subordinate was leaving the organization? What was that experience like and how did you react to it?
2. What were the signs, if you were aware, that your employee was not happy or engaged?
3. Regarding the previous question, whenever a professional subordinate separated from the organization, how did that affect your perception of employee commitment and loyalty?
4. Can you give me a sense [or example] from your organization(s) of how you as a leader are aware of professional staff engagement and satisfaction? How is that communication facilitated if at all?
5. Related to the previous question, can you give me an example of a time when you were surprised to find that organizational morale was different than you expected?
 - Perhaps during a time of change?
6. Regarding your professional staff, how important are their unique skills and/or aptitudes to you as a leader?

7. Was there ever a subordinate employee that you felt was crucial to the running of the organization?
8. Do have a sense for what the off-boarding or “exit process” might be failing to inform your organization?

Second group.

9. Could you elaborate on things you might consider “warning signs” of unhappiness or engagement of a professional employee?
 - How would you assess these signs?
10. How do regard or prioritize “autonomy” of professionals typically?
11. To what extent is professional courtesy practiced in your organization?
 - What is your understanding or perspective on the role of courtesy?
12. Does professional culture reduce how much we can realistically “know” about each other (happiness, engagement, etc)?
13. Who is ultimately responsible or accountable when an employee leaves?

Third group.

Thinking about your example of the person you worked with (or employed directly) that decided to leave the organization abruptly, I have 2 short questions:

14. In your career, have you had several of these “sudden” departure events of somebody you supervised?
15. If yes, where in the sequence did your example (from our big interview) fall?

After this second round of interviews, this new data was transcribed and incorporated into the analysis. In my remaining 2 interviews, I appended the interview protocol to now include more probing and depth about these themes of warning signs, autonomy, and accountability.

After all participants had been interviewed at least once, I had a substantial backbone for my emerging theory and began to craft out my findings. During this process of organizing my findings, my emerging theory was suggesting that some leaders may have repeated undesirable behaviors that perpetuated the cycle of unplanned turnover.

To understand this better and provide some validity to the suggestions posed in the emerging theory, I attempted a third round of follow up interviews with my participants. I was able to get responses from 5 participants when I asked them if they had experienced repeated losses like the original experience we had discussed. The idea behind this questioning was to understand further behavioral aspects of leaders, their possible disconnect, and ultimately where responsibility for departure may lie. This proved to be beneficial to the study because I did find that some participants had broader experience with unplanned loss.

Limitations of the Study

This study proposes an emerging theory based on data collected from specific participants in an emergent fashion consistent with a constructivist approach. Thus, I was not seeking to discover an object truth or reality, but an interpretation of my participant socially constructed reality. This study was based on learning through interpretations from the researcher and opinions of select leader types. I constructed meaning along with the participants based on experiences in a manner consistent with a constructivist approach. My interpretation of warning signs and their attribution to turnover intent was based on my own meaning as well. Threats to validity include the fact that I might have ignored relevant data because I misinterpreted it, or that my participants weren't presenting their actual views.

My goal was to gain leaders' perspectives and understanding by way of individual responses, so, naturally consideration must be given to the various resistances to disclosure that most people have. Honesty will vary among participants and therefore could limit the quality of

the data collected. Given the sensitive nature of turnover, and the fact that some of these experiences could make the leader look bad, there could have been alterations in their explanations of events.

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality and anonymity of research data and interviewees will be strictly enforced. Limited identifying information about each subject will be known, and that information will not be disclosed in any part of the research. Interview data (transcriptions) as well as limited identifying information will be safeguarded by the researcher in password-protected digital files on personal media. No other individuals will be assisting in this research or have access to interviewee identifying information. In the instance of 3rd party transcription service as proposed (Rev.com), nondisclosure agreements were utilized.

Chapter IV: Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how leaders experience and understand unplanned separation of key professional employees they supervise in their organizations. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings that emerged from my conversations with leaders, supported by rich, grounded data. My conversations helped me to understand how leaders in organizations view, react, and feel about employee turnover. My intuition and interpretations of events based on my own experiences in organizational leadership settings played a role in the development of my theory. The participants in the study also have their own constructed realities from their experiences which they shared with me. So, in this study I am bringing our separate, socially constructed realities together in a process to generate a proposed theory.

As both a scholar and practicing leader within an organization, my research interests were driven by my personal desire to assess the various “illnesses” that afflict organizations. From my history of observations in professional environments, these “organizational illnesses” run the gamut from poor leadership, to diminished morale and motivation, and to organizational cultures of distrust and diminished values. My overarching personal mission is to help organizations understand and address these illnesses so that they become optimized, better places to work for the many dedicated professionals that contribute to the success of their organization.

My initial interest was sparked from experiences working “in the trenches” in several large organizations as a senior financial analyst over the course of 10+ years where I witnessed repeated voluntary, unnecessary turnover. These individuals that quit were professional colleagues and peers that had advanced skills, education, and years of experience, suddenly finding an organization that was not responsive or seemingly unconcerned about them. I kept

wondering why there was such a “disconnect” between company leadership and the reality of what was happening down in the trenches?

As a student of business, and working in professional finance roles, I was angered by seeing organizations appear to be acting irresponsibly, wasteful, and not accountable to anyone for letting working conditions degrade to the point that people felt the need to quit. I felt that this was not acceptable. Now, as a leader and department head working in a corporate setting, I’ve personally experienced the enormous costs of employee turnover. I see firsthand the costs that an organization bears in terms of knowledge and expertise loss whenever a key professional leaves the organization unexpectedly. At this stage in my career, I also have some personal perspective from the leadership side of the root causes of why turnover happens and why leaders sometimes come across as aloof or unconcerned about problems.

The goal of my study was to understand the perspectives of more experienced leaders about how they feel about losing key employees based on actual experiences they have had. Further, I wanted to get a sense for the circumstances surrounding their loss experience to look for commonality where it existed; a common denominator of environmental factors in their organizational settings that might tie together these shared experiences and lead to insights for how unplanned turnover occurs.

In this study several interesting findings emerged related to leader awareness of problems or situations with people and working environments. It was somewhat alarming to hear leaders recall conversations with employees expressing unhappiness with their job or working conditions, and that these were ultimately the reasons for deciding to leave the organization. It was peculiar that a manager would recall advanced awareness about a problem that led to an undesirable departure, when for the most part the problem might have been ameliorated by the

manager. A few examples referred to the difficult times during organizational restructuring or merger that lead to employee decisions to leave. My initial assumption was that feelings of job dissatisfaction were less overt or obvious, thus making sudden departures more of a bombshell. I did not expect to hear as much from leaders about their first-hand knowledge regarding employee unhappiness—especially since they were responding to questions about their feeling of “shock” of sudden departure of these employees. In this chapter I characterize these environmental factors as “warning signs” because they could be considered “red flags” that a leader might have noticed and may have been able to address to prevent the loss. These ranged from overarching negative working conditions to expressed unhappiness about the job, and in a couple of instances, expressed personal stressors from outside the workplace. In one example, the participant recounted how a senior subordinate employee spent years asking for more responsibility for the purpose of growing in the organization. This same leader was stunned at the sudden resignation of this employee who left for a more senior role with a competing company.

In this chapter, I also introduce the concept of “management disconnect” as the failure to connect leader behaviors with the circumstances and outcomes of separation such as with unplanned turnover. Leaders can play the central, pivotal role in any turnover event, and the reality supported by this study is that they may not be aware of the magnitude of their role. As mentioned above, in my interviews participants often referred to negative work situations with an employee and then told me about their shocked reactions when this person took the action to leave. It was scenarios like this that I found to be a troubling finding because it suggests systemic conditions which can be difficult to address and correct.

I first introduce the participants (Table 1), and then provide an overview of the emerging theory that evolved and the themes I formulated using quotes and descriptions from the participants themselves.

Participant Descriptions

I was interested in collecting the stories of losing a valuable, professional employees from experienced leaders (i.e., leaders who had significant leadership history measured by breadth and depth of experience). I researched their biographical professional histories from their LinkedIn profiles or industry publications where available. I was focused on a history of leadership at the Director level or higher, across several organizations preferably, and having direct supervision over professional, highly skilled employees. They also had to attest to having an experience of losing a senior-level professional surprisingly at some point in their career. My initial introduction email and solicitation for participation described these requirements. I was particular in my purposeful sample to select as wide a breadth of leaders from different types of organizations or industries in order to promote a greater breadth of experience in the data. The final roster of participants ranged in backgrounds from Education to corporate leadership in Marketing, Operations, Finance, Human Resources, Accounting, and I/T. The gender breakdown was 6 male and 3 female participants; however, this was not done purposely in the selection process.

Table 1 outlines each participant's basic leadership experience relevant to this study and briefly describes their event of losing an employee. Although the leader may have had several experiences of loss, these particular events referenced served as the primary source of leaders' reflections for responses to the interview questions.

Table 1

Participant Backgrounds and Loss Experience

Participant	Leadership experience	Loss experience referenced
1	Served as a senior vice president of a major corporation whose career spanned 40 years in operations leadership. He had worked his way up the ranks in the same corporation and held several leadership roles, eventually being responsible for a vast team of over several thousand people.	Discussed losing a manager of a large warehouse which was a critical, very independent role where he oversaw many employees. This person was dealing with several personal issues.
2	An executive in the I/T field working for major corporation and leading several major projects while overseeing teams of I/T professionals. Participant's career spans over 20 years in this field and has a long history of supervision of managers and professional individual contributors.	Discussed the frustration at losing a key technical professional during a time of organizational change (merger) who felt exasperated and disrespected when position titles were changed, and talent levels were disregarded.
3	A vice president at a major university, having held several VP titles in an education career of nearly 20 years. This participant currently oversees several hundred employees of all subordinate ranks below her and holds an advanced degree in Education.	Discussed extreme frustration of losing a manager that was seeking out opportunity for more money. Was a longtime acquaintance and was not given the opportunity to counteroffer.
4	Served as vice president of 2 large food service companies having concluded a 25-year career with one of them where he worked up the ranks. In his last position he oversaw several directors with critical responsibilities for two large restaurant brands.	Discussed the loss of a Director that left for a new competitor offering more responsibility.
5	Served as vice president of operations for a large restaurant chain, and prior to this held the position of chief operating officer for another major restaurant chain. Participant's leadership career spanned several decades and included multiple organizations where he oversaw teams of individual leaders and professionals.	Discussed the loss of a critically talented employee that left to start their own business.

Participant	Leadership experience	Loss experience referenced
6	Serves as vice president of marketing for a large restaurant company, having held a vice president position in 5 different organizations over a 20+ year career span.	Discussed the loss of a long-term, high-ranking team member who felt that there was no more opportunity for advancement in the company.
7	Served as a controller (VP) at a large national company overseeing many accounting professionals. This participant's leadership career spans over 20 years having held a director or controller title in at least 5 different organizations.	Discussed the near loss of a key professional that disclosed an offer from another company in the hopes of obtaining advancement in current position.
8	A marketing executive whose leadership career spans almost 20 years where he has been a director or vice president in 7 different organizations.	Discussed the loss of a professional that was upset and disgruntled at times with new leadership and processes, and, was dealing with several personal conflicts.
9	A human resources executive recently serving as the vice president of organizational development where he oversaw several professionals and teams. His leadership career spans over 20 years where he has held the title of director or vice president in 4 organizations.	Discussed the loss of a tenured professional that was not acclimating well and was very resistant during a time of organizational restructuring.

Overview of Emerging Theory

As a brief reminder, I was asking each leader questions like those shown in Figure 5 as conversation starters to gather their perspective and experiences dealing with unplanned turnover. As this study progressed over several interviews, an interesting pattern began to take shape which formed the basis of my theory. Since my interview questions were tailored to elicit personal stories about employee turnover experiences, details of their experiences, attitudes and awareness about conditions related to that event started to become visible to me. Nearly all of the leader recollections followed a similar sequence of events that I ordered in into general phases: A

trust phase, then a turnover event, followed by a period of shock, and lastly some form of regret or remorse (Figure 6). What was interesting and noteworthy was how this cycle appeared to repeat itself from leader to leader as each reflected on their experience of losing a talented employee.

First Group

1. Can you think of a time when you were surprised that a professional subordinate was leaving the organization? What was that experience like and how did you react to it?
2. What were the signs, if you were aware, that your employee was not happy or engaged?
3. Regarding the previous question, whenever a professional subordinate separated from the organization, how did that affect your perception of employee commitment and loyalty?
4. Can you give me a sense [or example] from your organization(s) of how you as a leader are aware of professional staff engagement and satisfaction? How is that communication facilitated if at all?
5. Related to the previous question, can you give me an example of a time when you were surprised to find that organizational morale was different than you expected? Perhaps during a time of change?
6. Regarding your professional staff, how important are their unique skills and/or aptitudes to you as a leader?
7. Was there ever a subordinate employee that you felt was crucial to the running of the organization?
8. Do have a sense for what the off-boarding or 'exit process' might be failing to inform your organization?

Second Group

9. Could you elaborate on things you might consider "warning signs" of unhappiness or engagement of a professional employee?
 - a. How would you assess these signs?
 - b. What would you do differently?
10. How do regard or prioritize "autonomy" of professionals typically?
11. To what extent is professional courtesy practiced in your organization?
 - a. What is your understanding or perspective on the role of courtesy?
12. Does professional culture reduce how much we can realistically 'know' about each other (happiness, engagement, etc)?
13. Who is ultimately responsible or accountable when an employee leaves?

Third Group

Thinking about your example of the person you worked with (or employed directly) that decided to leave the organization abruptly, I have 2 short questions:

14. In your career, have you had several of these 'sudden' departure events of somebody you supervised?
15. If yes, where in the sequence did your example (from our big interview) fall?

Figure 5. Interview questions.

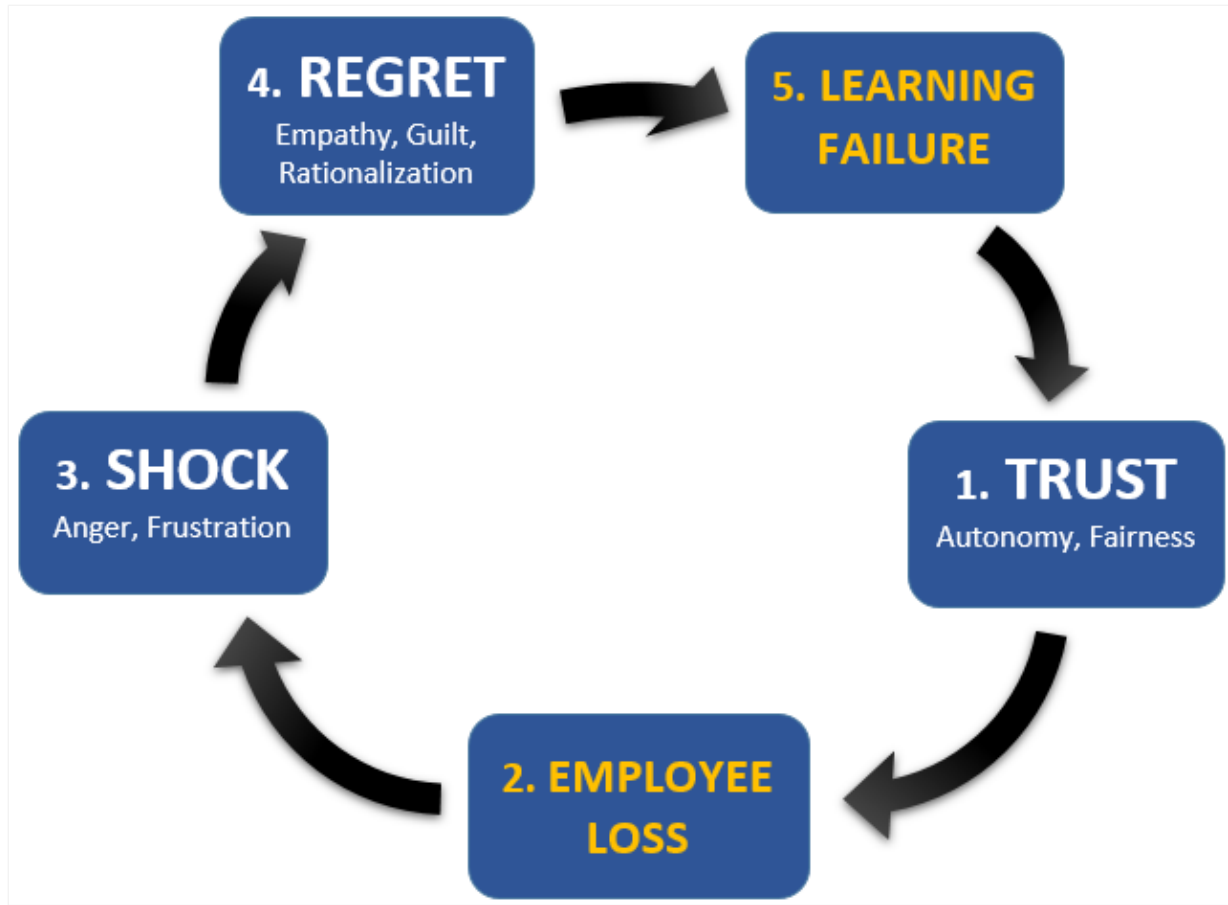


Figure 6. Leader experience sequence.

I'll now explain the major parts in the leader experience sequence as I've perceived them based on the data collected from the interviews with my participants. The key focus stages of Trust, Shock, and Regret are what I will explicate in this chapter to understand leader perceptions. The Employee Loss and Learning Failure stages are simply my descriptions of an event to help reinforce the chronology of the entire experience sequence.

Leader Experience Sequence

Phase 1: Trust. One of the major themes that emerged from participant recollections when asked to describe the ways in which they managed professionals was an initial high level of trust. In this study trust can be thought of as a construct that relates to the way leaders in

organizations customarily treat their professional staffs. I describe it as the unspoken veil of “space” whereby managers trust that their key individual contributors are acting accordingly, in the manner that the job requires to benefit the department or organization. Trust in organizations has been shown to be very beneficial because it facilitates conditions for higher performance (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). Further, it is believed that the higher the level of trust in a work environment the more risk a person is willing to take among colleagues, leading to more collaboration and overall higher unit performance (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Larson & LaFasto, 1989). This is consistent with the participant attitudes and how they referred to professional subordinates. After interviewing the nine participants repeating themes emerged that appeared to support the construct of trust: Autonomy and Fairness. My observation and definition of trust in the context of managers in this study was constructed and supported by these two concepts.

Autonomy. Consistent with trust, managers expected that each of their professional employees would act autonomously in their respective areas of responsibility. This implies that very little micromanagement is needed and that they could act in a self-sufficient capacity. Since most of the participants were of a sufficiently high level of authority, the level of individual contributor that directly reported to them would also have been at a senior level, often having direct reports or teams under their management as well. Autonomy in organizational settings can be defined as when a person has greater flexibility and freedom to decide which tasks to perform (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). This definition is consistent with the characteristics of knowledge workers discussed in chapter 2, and most importantly, autonomy has been associated with greater knowledge sharing and higher job performance (Llopis & Foss, 2015). A high degree of autonomy was common in their roles because these people bore a lot of experience in their respective fields and micromanagement is not typically customary for professionals of this

level. Participants often stated that the basis for high levels of trust-driven autonomy was to treat people in a manner that they would expect to be treated themselves, and, respect for them as professionals with unique expertise. At the same time, there was an expectation that these professionals did not need day-to-day supervision and could be trusted to make their own critical decisions for the organization.

Participant 1 described this context of trust supported by autonomy that was part of his management of the departing employee:

He didn't see me every day. We might talk once a week, every other week. He was an individual contributor. I set up his training, his orientation, I put him with good people. We talked about goals and objectives . . . I felt like he had enough experience, and I also felt like he had enough initiative to go do those things on his own...I didn't have the time to have a daily relationship with him, because I have other things to do.... If that was the case, that Brian was one of those people that needed daily communication and daily direction, then I hired the wrong person.

When Participant 1 stated that he felt like the employee had enough experience and initiative to do things on his own, he was expressing his personal feelings about how much he trusted this warehouse manager to be responsible and self-managed. This position was remotely managed so the requirement for autonomy was present in the job itself, but this implies that trust and autonomy went hand-in-hand.

Participant 2 described having a similar perspective about trust as it relates to giving skilled professionals the flexibility to manage themselves as they see fit:

I like people to be autonomous because I like to be autonomous. I don't like micromanagers. I don't treat people like that, but also you've got to keep in mind, and the people I work with are not junior level people. They have a lot of years of experience. Typically, if you try to get in their business, you have a lot of trouble with them because they are used to managing themselves.

Like the prior quote, the participant associates "years of experience" as a personal criterion for trust and the ability to be self-managed and get the job done. While this was not a remotely

managed position, she expresses her feelings of disdain for micromanaging and respect for autonomy in the same breath.

Participant 2—while referencing her leadership in a highly technical I/T field—also expressed how levels of autonomy and trust are more a function of the expertise employees possess, and therefore a necessity:

It's probably the way I've always been, but whenever I tried to manage what they do, like tell them what to do, usually that's when I make the mistake because they know more than I do . . . In my particular line of business, I'm in IT, but I'm not an expert in this. They are. What I had to learn to do was just stop trying to micromanage the situation or design it the way I want it to look and let them give me the solution.

In the above quote, Participant 2 again expresses the necessity of self-management (autonomy) with highly skilled, technical employees as she describes the mistakes that she's learned from in past management experiences. Her statement here suggests a necessary quality of restraint and respect for the knowledge of a professional employee in her field.

Hearing leaders describe the idea of compulsory or “managed distance” as part of autonomy was intriguing. I expected that distance between leaders and subordinates was a “necessary evil” of sorts, more of a professional courtesy because leaders might want to know everything going on with their people but felt compelled to refrain from meddling. I was told this was not necessarily the case and that it was sometimes situational as Participant 5 clarified his idea of professional courtesy and respect referring to autonomy this way:

Yeah, courteous to me has more of an implication of how you actually treat someone versus how you lead someone . . . Yeah, that's what I've always believed, at least in the last 30 years I guess . . . I do believe in treating everybody with respect. And even if they don't deserve it sometimes, hoping that they'll grow into that respect received.

As a seasoned leader, Participant 5 understood autonomy, but understood the equal importance of courtesy and respect that came with leadership. He was also careful to clarify that giving his people autonomy and freedom to self-manage still required support in the way of

providing a plan of action so that they could succeed. The failure of a manager to provide a structure, he suggests, is not fair to the development of the employee:

I am a believer in hiring the absolute best people that you can or promoting them into a position, giving them guidance, direction, strategic leadership, and then leaving them the hell alone . . . You've got to give them structure . . . you have to give them a blueprint . . . [if] you're promoted to a manager, you're handed the keys to the store and told good luck. Well, as you move up the line in different and higher positions, that is exceedingly unfair to the employee and to the company.

Further regarding autonomy and trust, Participant 4 introduced the idea of his leadership being very situational where he tailored the amount of distance based on assessments of a person's level of mastery:

It depends on the person's ability and their willingness. I think some people want autonomy, some don't . . . I would look at it as a very overt step in that person's development, and that step in our trust relationship . . . I'm a big believer in something that was called situational leadership, which was when somebody's brand new at something, they need high direction and they want the security . . . constant feedback . . . constant approval. So, it's what I would call a high-touch, low autonomy environment. And then once that person proved to have that skill . . . you don't need me anymore. I think that's a good trust building step.

What Participant 4 is referencing is a classic leadership theory known as situational leadership that provides a 4-stage model of how a leader should lead their employees based on their assessment of competency and maturity (Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Nelson, 1993). The final stage in the model suggests that an employee is competent, mature, and ideal for the least amount of directive, coaching leadership (i.e., high autonomy). His explanation illustrates his approach to trust and autonomy. He continued to provide more perspective on how personal, one-on-one time can play an important role in the building of trust from strengthened relationships:

I think if you do have that trust like you mentioned, so if someone's competent and they have trust, and you've built enough of a rapport with them, then even if they're an autonomous person not only . . . well hopefully will they come to you if there's a problem, and not bury it. But also, I think if you have that kind of trust and relationship with a person, you should be able to pick up on signs . . . so I think where you're going with this kind of trust and autonomy thing, at the higher levels when you get into Vice President, Executive Vice President, there are times when you might see your boss for

that half hour a week and that's it. So to me, I know that as a direct report to someone else, I absolutely cherish that time to be able to express my feelings of maybe discontent.

The idea of a situational approach to how much autonomy you afford a professional employee was strongly echoed by Participant 7 who oversaw many accountants who tend to be very task oriented. She offered a distinct perspective on professionals not wanting to be micromanaged yet still yearning for structure and direction:

I kind of look at that on an individual basis . . . because some like autonomy and some like not to be micromanaged but want help to keep them on task. It totally depends on the individual. I've done things where I've laid out a daily routine . . . this is what you need to do, but then the expectation is wean them off of that because I can't do your job for you.

I asked more about concerns related to professional distance with employees that perhaps needed far less guidance and coaching. She stated that with some individuals, the distance is a definite concern:

When it's almost too much autonomy . . . where they didn't tell me something that was going on or that I could have helped with . . . if you'd have checked in with me I could have helped move that along. So, I've had situations where interaction was too little. I started to wonder why. These people liked to be autonomous, they didn't want to bother me. I started wondering okay, is it because they thought I was too busy? Are they thinking that I would be angry that they weren't making progress?

Fairness. Another theme that influenced and supported the trust phase was a strong sense of professional fairness as the participants explained how they managed people. Several leaders expressed a strong sentiment on the importance of treating their subordinates in a fair and respectful manner consistent with their values—essentially a Golden Rule type of attitude of how to treat your employees. As leaders of more experienced employees, this was sometimes their basis for trusting their people and their ability to make appropriate decisions. In chapter 2, I introduced the concept of fairness perceptions in the workplace as a huge component of overall motivation and satisfaction. Stemming from equity theory (Adams, 1963), fairness and justice

evaluations are constantly taking place among people in organizations and leaders need to be aware of how this influences employee behavior and attitudes.

In my interviews with participants I observed a strong sense of maturity and wisdom that had been honed through years of experience leading teams. An integral part of the leader trust component can be heavily influenced by a valuing fairness. As Participant 4 stated when reflecting back on times of great organizational change:

We hit the brakes and all of sudden the culture became structure over people. Fairness became an absolutely critical issue at the staffing level because if I had four people who were managers, you absolutely had to treat them fairly or else you got in to favoritism; or the right person might leave, and you'd be left with three wrong people. So, to me, fairness became the way to develop people equally and to develop trust.

Thematically similar to other responses about autonomy and trust, Participant 8 stated that “he liked to set the tone and direction from a planning perspective,” and described his management style and attitude this way:

If you're doing your job, then there's really only two times that we need to have conversations: one, when you need something and I can help you get through whatever that challenge is; or two, whenever it's time to celebrate something that you've done that you feel really great about

Participant 9 felt strongly that building trust was integral in managing his people because it laid a foundation for how to stay in touch and fostered communication. Once that trust was built through constant interaction with employees, he could then empower them. He stated at this point “where they have the skill sets and the passion turn them loose and let them do their thing . . . my job is to just coach them, keep them within the curves in the road.”

Phase 2: Shock. As previously mentioned, participant recollections followed a distinct pattern when describing the sequence of events surrounding the loss of a valued employee. They described feelings of shock, anger, and frustration when I asked them to describe a time when they were surprised that a professional employee of theirs was leaving the organization. In the

context of this study I interpret managerial shock as the process in which management expresses their initial reaction to sudden departure. This experience was for some an extended period of separation as they probed and learned more about the reasons behind the intentions to leave and made retention attempts. These would put the leader in a sometimes awkward and stressful position to offer a financial incentive if that was possible in their organization. In other experiences, the exit notification was much more cut-and-dry as the employee was steadfast in their actions and not retainable; The employee was already committed to leaving.

Several participants expressed their shocked reactions at the news, using terms such as “dumbfounded,” “out-of-the-blue,” and “caught off guard.” Even though they were speaking about very negative, sometimes embarrassing events in their professional careers, the participants were candid and direct when they recounted their experiences. A couple of participants noted that they’ve kept in touch many years later via professional networks with these departed employees and maintained friendships. This was relevant because I also asked them how or if these events changed their personal opinion or perception of the individual and their notions of organizational loyalty. What was interesting was that although the general sentiment was very negative, there were a few surprises in the positive reactions of these senior leaders.

Participant 1 described losing a key employee, a warehouse director, that he managed from a distance, and who was afforded a high level of autonomy:

I was kind of dumbfounded. I kind of looked back on where I missed warning signs, and I don’t know that there were any real warnings signs. As I think back, I mean could I have done some things differently? Yeah, but I was pretty surprised when he wound up staying with us less than a year . . . he just called me up one day and said, “I don’t want to do this anymore. I’m going to manage my mother’s estate, and I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, but here’s my two seconds notice,” and just left!

When I then asked about how this event changed his perception of his employee he told me that it completely ruined his perception of this person as a great employee with a promising future at the company:

I went through a period of what did I do wrong, what should I have done different. Then I kind of morphed into a period of being pissed off . . . I went from asking myself what I could have done differently and what did I do wrong

The main sentiment of this experience was how discouraging and disruptive the abrupt nature of the departure was, without the courtesy of notification or chance to fix the situation. The sense of betrayal was fairly clear from Participant 1, as he now questioned the integrity of this employee.

Participant 6 described the unexpected loss of a Vice President that he had worked with for over 10 years. His relationship with this person was strong he felt, so the news was very shocking as he described it:

So, she came in just out of the blue one day and I could read her after 10 almost 11 years of working with her, I knew exactly what it was. And there was no amount of talking to her about staying . . . and it shocked me.

When asked if this event changed his perception of the individual, he stated,

No, I was disappointed, of course. Obviously. Because then you look at it from a selfish perspective, and then you think, God, you know. It's twice as much work for me right now, right? In terms of being able to pick up her slack

Similarly, Participant 5 described a situation where a key employee was leaving to start his own business. While there was shock and disappointment involved, this context was less negative sounding, almost understanding:

It's not because they have a problem with their boss, it's because they want to try something new, something different. And that's hard to address as a manager. That's not something you can go into your toolbox of how do I keep employees here? That's a hard thing . . . when somebody wants to go and start their own company, that's a hard one to compete against.

Participant 5 then stated that his perception of this departing employee was eventually that of admiration due to the nature of the departure. This employee, although critical to the organization, was leaving to for a good cause:

In that situation, actually he moved up a notch in my perception because he was willing to actually take the risk to go from a fairly well-paid position... And that takes guts . . . people talk about it a lot . . . I think that takes courage and guts, personally

In a very different situation, Participant 3 recalled an event of losing a trusted long-time employee that was particularly angering and frustrating as she viewed the role of professional courtesy as being mutual. There was a perception of lack of respect for the employer in the way one should handle leaving an organization abruptly:

He was in there saying that he was going to leave, that he had been offered a job, and to be honest, it ticked me off because I was completely caught off guard. He was a subordinate and he was like one of my managers and somebody that I had known . . . where I'm dealing with somebody that is a manager, typically I know if they're looking . . . I'm not caught off guard because that's the respect I would expect . . . at my level, and at a manager's level, like director, associate director, at that kind of level, I think it's a common courtesy.

Participant 3 continued to recall the anger and frustration of the event, even mentioning this subsequent interaction that illustrated the damage to the relationship:

Unless you've got a bad relationship with your boss that you would tell them . . . because then that gives me an opportunity to think about, well, would I counter [offer? And because he caught me off guard and I found out months later that he was really upset because I didn't counter, I said, "Well, you ticked me off."

Participant 4 also expressed a tone of shock and frustration because of the nature of the separation from what was thought to be a very loyal employee:

A competitor had moved into town and was doing quite a bit of hiring, and there was already an alert out within the company that "Company X is coming to our market, they're trying to take our people." And one of the most ardent supporters of, "Hey, we've got to stay here and be a team and fight against this other company" eventually decided to leave, and it was quite a bombshell because it really felt at that point like the tide had turned . . . I think the big message that it sent was that this other company could compete on things that we couldn't retaliate against.

When I asked about whether this separation ultimately influenced opinion of this person, he stated,

I don't anymore. I don't let it color my feelings. I actually, I take the stance for my teammates that I want them to make as much money as they possibly can, I will have very honest conversations about how they go about doing that.

Participant 9 also lost a highly skilled professional suddenly who was a respected and tenured individual. It was during a phase of great change related to a merger in the organization, so the thought was simply that "she's been there a long time, and I just felt like it was something where you just weather the storm." He further expressed his shock at the time by saying, "I was surprised she would leave the company . . . maybe [she was] a little difficult to work with, but I certainly didn't want her to leave."

The general reaction for most of these losses of key, trusted professionals is that of shock, frustration, and in some cases, anger. However, it's important to note that not all the leader reactions were entirely negative. About half of the participants viewed the sudden departure as respectable on a personal level, although costly to the organization.

Phase 3: Regret. I characterize this phase in the participant recollections as the reflective, post event phase where empathy, guilt, and rationalization all intermixed to form a leaders' summary evaluation of the loss event. At this point, I began to hear in the responses hints and references to warning signs, occasionally alluding to their own "management disconnect" in some examples. This post event period generally carried mixed emotions in the responses because most leaders were simply disappointed in themselves, the situation, and the departing employee for the most part. I heard a tone of empathy from several because they understood that some of the reasons for leaving were understandable and logical, but still regrettable. Clear from the tone in the responses was that in all cases, these surprise losses of their subordinate employees were not desired. So, when asked to describe a time when they were

caught off guard by the loss of a key employee, they all responded with examples of losing valuable contributors to their organization. Several leaders advanced the notion that the best people leave first when the organization is faced with challenges. These could be times of great change such as restructuring, or phases of heavy competitor intrusion. These are simply valuable people to any organization and to themselves, and they know it.

Participant 1 mentioned earlier about going into a brief phase of asking “what I did wrong,” or, what he could he have done differently to avert this situation. There is also a tone of rationalization in this reflection on the event:

I think maybe it's one of those things where when you look at his work history before our company, it's pretty good. Maybe our company was just a bad fit for him, and maybe that role was just a bad fit . . . With this guy, he didn't work for me that long, and quite honestly, I didn't get to know his personal situation until it was too late.

Participant 5 stated this about his experience losing a key employee that wanted to start their own business. The real pain points he expressed was based on the fact that retention was essentially impossible, but most importantly, not warranted. This was an example of being empathetic when losing a valuable individual contributor for reasons that are hard to contest:

In this particular case, and I recall it vividly because I thought I had a really good relationship with this individual and I have learned through the years not to take it personally . . . And that was the out-of-the-blue deal . . . he did the right thing, went to his boss, and then his boss came to me. But there were no warning signs that I saw and that could be my fault

Participant 2 shared similar feelings of disappointment and regret from the standpoint of lost investment in training and other factors. In the same reflection she also expressed empathy, which was not uncommon to hear from leaders in their recollections:

Typically, these people, when they're a trusted employee or you think highly of them, you're not really upset with them. In some cases, you can tell and you either understand where they're coming from or you're just sorry. To me, you're just sorry to see them go. It's just disappointing because you've invested time in them . . . Just when we get somebody good, they leave . . . But I could understand why he was going . . . In my opinion, if you have somebody, a valued employee that leaves abruptly, typically you

think highly of that person. Not only are they your work person, peer or subordinate or whatever, but you think highly of them. Usually it melds and you think highly of them as a person, or at least I do.

Participant 6 echoed the disappointment that could be expected when you resign to the fact that there is no real remedy to the departure situation. This was his take on the loss event:

So, it was really disappointing...Only one person can decide what's best for that person and that's that person. As much as we, as leaders, can lay out development plans and all of that kind of stuff, help you get to the next level, if that level doesn't come fast enough, some people just say, "Enough already. I can go somewhere else and get it."..Yeah. It was good for her but it's always hard and you try to be encouraging and like I said, I've always believed that only one person knows what's best for them and that's that person. You can only make the offer of what can we do to keep you and if they are open to anything, then you go and make that happen if they're worth keeping. And if not, you wish them well. No, I was disappointed, of course. Obviously. Because then you look at it from a selfish perspective, and then you think, God, you know. It's twice as much work for me right now, right?

I heard a tone of resignation in the voice of Participant 6 as he recounted this experience. His regret stemmed from the "land-locked" position he was in by not having any better job advancement to offer this person, knowing that it was adding to the likelihood of withdrawal. Notwithstanding, he expressed strong compassion with the employee's plight in the situation.

Participant 8 shared how regret as a leader can easily be internalized and that he still struggles with how things ultimately concluded, demonstrating the long-term effects of these separations:

As a manager, those are the times when you kick yourself a little bit looking back in hindsight. I think on one hand you say, "Hey I really appreciate that individual showing up to work and doing the job that was asked of her despite the fact that she probably wasn't ultimately happy." And so, there's a point where you go, "Hey kudos to here, and I appreciate the effort." But then that other disappointing, you know, the other side of the coin is just disappointing, and you say, I wish that she would have talked to me or communicated with me and given me the opportunity to address that.

Participant 9 also reflected on the sudden loss of a tenured and valuable employee during a difficult phase of organizational change. This person was resistant to the change from the

beginning and ultimately could not cope with all the adaptation required. His sentiments were this:

I think I looked at it more in terms of, wow, this is a shame that she's leaving because she's had this wealth of knowledge and she's been kind of a subject matter expert. So, there was a concern of losing that skillset and as a leader I felt at the time like, did I fail in a way here? Is there something I could have done to have made this work?

And I just think that ... I think it was inevitable. I think they would have left just because the change was just too much for them. It wasn't my leadership style or anyone else's. Again, that's my perception. But I did try to talk with her and see if she would stay and she'd already made up her mind. I believe she realized I don't fit anymore so she left.

These examples illustrating the Regret phase of the leader experience tell a story of the human, affective side of the failure of a broken relationship. These “lessons learned” work in concert to demonstrate that even relationships between employee and manager can be strong and have lingering impacts that reinforce our understanding of people and how challenging “leading people” can be. Leaders are somewhat vulnerable because they are in positions to build meaningful relationships that could end for reasons that they never understand. The leaders’ regret in a few of the preceding example seems misplaced because it’s not founded in something they did wrong, it’s just a natural reaction where leaders may feel as though they somehow failed the employee.

These three sections—Trust, Shock, and Regret—constitute the primary sections of the Leader Experience Sequence of the emerging theory. The next sections outline the other major parts of the emerging theory that detail overarching conditions enveloping the experience sequence and provide the context for why this sequence appears to happen for leaders. Figure 7 illustrates the sequence labeled as the “faulty process” that now incorporates the full picture of events and circumstances that are being explained.



Figure 7. Emerging grounded theory of leader experience sequence (faulty process).

Warning Signs

Warning signs are conscious or subconscious environmental factors surrounding the departing employees that were major contributors in their decisions to leave. Based on the data, I characterize these as more obvious red flags that might lead a rational, aware person to understand that an employee is not happy or has intentions to leave the organization. These can be more or less overt depending on the circumstances, and since these were culled directly from the narratives of the participants, they are much more relevant to this study because they apply directly to the person that left.

Participant 1 referred to losing a valuable senior employee suddenly. He referenced knowing about a serious family medical situation that this employee was dealing with related to his dying mother that needed his care. He noted that this employee needed extensive time off in the weeks preceding his resignation to care for his ailing mother. He referred to “getting the feeling he was pretty stressed” and that “these personal issues may have helped him decide to leave.”

Participant 1 also mentioned that this person’s mother ultimately died during this frame and also acknowledged that this guy was single and easily relocatable stating: “I think that probably made him rethink his life . . . so yeah I got totally blindsided.”

In another example of missing a potential red flag, Participant 2 referenced her loss of a key I/T employee during a time of organizational restructuring (see Figure 8). She acknowledged this about the poor working conditions preceding the departure:

Well, the situation wasn’t good because they were merging two organizations. They were melding ours in, so when people had managerial jobs, they were brought down to individual contributors. It wasn’t, at least in my opinion, it wasn’t a respectful transition of people. It was more of a hostile takeover, if you will . . . there were many people that weren’t happy.

Organizational Restructuring

When Participant 2 refers to the situation not being good due to a “merger” they are referring to a very degraded and stressful work environment. This is primarily because in a typical corporate merger one of the objectives is achieving greater efficiency by combining existing resources (people) without the addition of redundant positions (jobs) from both merging organizations. This typically means that job redundancies are targeted for elimination, so the work environment becomes very stressful and uncertain. In corporate environments, because of the prevalence of such activity, people know that job security is very threatened and tend to act (i.e., leave before being fired or laid off).

Figure 8. Concept definition: Organizational restructuring.

Participant 3 referred to direct comments from an employee before he left about an external opportunity arising with another company. This employee actually lost his own subordinate to the same competitor that was paying better wages prior to his own departure. This was somehow not perceived as a red flag and ultimately this second employee jumped ship as well to chase the same opportunity:

He had told me about his own employee leaving because his employee had told him he was looking for this other job and had been offered, and there was no way I could match that salary. I would have countered to keep him.

Participant 4 mentioned a few things that could have been seen by leaders as a warning sign to the organization at large. Again, this dealt with a competing organization in the same industry that was aggressively seeking talent. In this instance however, the participant's company notified (warned) its employees about the new "intruder." This was probably an opportunity to start actively working on retention strategies, addressing the job satisfaction of your own employees. He recalled this experience:

A competitor had moved into town and was doing quite a bit of hiring, and there was already an alert out within the company that "Company X is coming to our market, they're trying to take our people." They actually attracted somebody that we wanted to keep by giving them more responsibility and making it sound like a better idea and a little bit more autonomy . . . this really called into question the structure that we had in place.

Participant 6 seemed to be especially aware of a multitude of unfulfilled aspirations that pertained to a key employee that he lost. The issues stemmed from responsibilities that this senior-level employee was eager to have as part of a tenured career. It was this unfulfilled need, coupled with a clear lack of a path to progression that led to the separation ultimately and could have been seen as a red flag:

So, I always knew that she wanted more. She kept asking for more. She wanted to be included in a lot of stuff. She wanted to learn . . . None worse than myself, didn't want to lose her but ultimately it became a factor of there's no room for me to grow within the company . . . nor was there any opening for another piece of business for her to move over to at the next level up which would have been VP to SVP. So, no amount of money,

it wasn't necessarily about the money, because you can give people more money but not just the title. Even though she was the number two, she wanted, more so than more money, the fact she wanted to be the total lead. She wanted to be the number one lead.

Regarding this same experience, when I asked specifically about any discussions that took place over the years that might have directly related to or hinted about a potential separation, he stated,

Well, no. Over the course of 10 years, we had many discussions about it because she was always one ... She was great about asking for more responsibility . . . Help me better understand the P&L. Help me better understand how the franchise system works. Help me better understand the strategy behind this.

Hearing statements like this from leaders suggests that the departure should not come as a shock when it happens because of so much previous overt prior disclosure from a dissatisfied employee.

Another example of a possible red flag, Participant 8 mentioned a couple of obvious frustrations that the departing employee had with him, and, fully admitted that conditions had deteriorated, which likely led to the departure:

There were, I would say, minor “dustups” is probably a good way to describe that. She, I think, in turn was a good soldier and did the things here and there, probably professionally pushed back. I think that if I look back and was candid with myself that her pushing back was doing things differently, and not in the manner that she would want to do those things, but because she probably needed the job that she went along with it . . . It was where she was digging in her heels, I was digging in my heels, and ultimately the department structure and the decisions were on my shoulders, so at that point it's like, “We have to do it this way.” Those times were the ones that I think it probably got to the point where it was just enough was enough for her.

Participant 9 made several statements that could be considered a warning sign of a person's decision to leave as he reflected on his loss of a key employee during great organizational change. He stated that “she kept pushing back on all the changes” and “she chose not to be onboard with all the changes.” More ominously, he mentioned knowing how unhappy his employee was when he stated these observations:

It was because for as much as I felt that, I think from a personality viewpoint, she was just naturally averse to change. Or being asked to do anything differently. You could see

it in her verbal and nonverbal. She would just become a little anxious and excited and defensive. I wasn't surprised that she was unhappy because that was obvious.

The preceding examples highlight an important component to the overall emerging theory because of the concurrent nature of both sudden departure events and warning signs. Some are more conspicuous while others require more attention from leaders to perceive.

High Communication Environment

One of the central areas of focus of this research was to understand leader awareness of conditions in their organizational domains that might contribute to unplanned turnover. A large component of that is having a role in the promotion and assessment of engagement and satisfaction of employees. This could take both formal and informal paths dependent on the unique working environment and the overall management style of each leader. Much of this was addressed by my research question #3: What role have leaders played in promoting job satisfaction, engagement, and commitment to the organization of departed personnel? To address this, I asked leaders as part of my interview protocol specifically how they as leaders are aware of professional staff engagement and satisfaction, and how is communication facilitated.

My purpose in this entire line of inquiry is related to leader awareness because of what is suggested in my emerging Trust-Shock-Regret model. One might assume that there must be something missing or lacking in how leaders and their key employees communicate to help explain the disconnect between environmental factors on the job (warning signs) and the shock of the loss. Even though autonomy was a priority as detailed earlier, what I also heard from participants was that nearly all these experienced leaders had well-established practices for keeping in touch with their people. These practices most often took the form of scheduled one-on-one meetings or visits but were also hands on team engagements by getting involved in team

projects. These active processes of communication do not contradict the concept of professional autonomy because the latter refers to refraining from micromanaging people in their tasks.

In every example of these team communication opportunities, it became clear how important this was to these leaders. It was mentioned in several interviews how critical it was that leaders be proactive in initiating connections with their subordinates. These responses about assessing engagement seemed to always lead in the same direction for every leader interviewed. They felt very strongly about one-on-one time, even going so far in an example from Participant 7 to state that employees themselves “yearned for their one-on-one meeting time because it was important to them.” It was their chance to vent which tells me that relationships and trust were well-established in this example (see Figure 9).

The idea that so much formal and informal communication was in place poses an interesting quandary that supports the idea of an overall disconnect between managers and subordinates.

How could these leaders ostensibly know more about their employees through all this direct contact and still be unaware of troubling issues or problems brewing?

My initial assumption about the participants' communication with subordinates was that it must have been deficient because they told me how surprised they were. As nearly all participants detailed their rigorous communication priority and practice, it became puzzling about how so much understanding and awareness was missed. Was it just denial, apathy, or was something else happening?

Figure 9. Researcher reflection.

One of the key points that I heard from all leaders was that informal communication efforts were critical to learning as much as you can about your employees. These took the form of unplanned visits and establishment of constant presence and concern for their subordinates when time permitted. In fact, it was echoed numerous times that informal or impromptu meetings

were their preferred methods of engagement and quality time. In an example from Participant 6 he mentioned that his technique was to insert himself as a helper in team projects even if it was a simple task. This he felt built a lot of trust and improved communication with his team of professionals. He made the time and effort to work on more tactical projects to achieve this outcome.

So, a high communication environment didn't always have to be formalized but tended to always be an integral part of the leadership process for everyone that I interviewed. Building and maintain trust was the intended outcome of all these meetings, and, was the leader's belief that they had achieved that in their relationships with their people.

Management Disconnect

Throughout these interviews, senior leaders recalled their past career experiences of losing key professionals in shocking, abrupt manners. Woven into their narratives was a common thread of some knowledge about individual circumstances or conditions of dissatisfaction or unhappiness that preceded the separation. As mentioned previously, a repeating cycle of Trust-Shock-Regret emerged as a theme which inspired my curiosity as to how this similar cycle was present in the experiences from leader to leader in their recollections. Each experience was presented unanimously as a negative loss to the organization, and at the same time, perceived as a teaching or learning experience demonstrated by their Regret phase. I began to sense that, amid all the warning signs emerging, some degree of mental disconnect was present in some of these managers.

For example, regarding the idea of disconnection, when Participant 1 recalled losing a valuable employee, listing off a number of negative conditions preceding the separation, proceeded to explain the shock of the event follow by stating, "I was totally blindsided . . . there were no warning signs . . . never saw that one coming."

My interpretation of this recollection was that this participant had to be aware of most of the negative conditions but was able to set that awareness aside. This would be an example of disconnect and could help to explain, in part, some of the shock of the departure.

Similarly, Participant 6 stated how absolutely shocked he was upon hearing from a long-term senior employee that she was leaving the company. This was immediately after telling me about how many conversations they had together about her desire for much more responsibility and her unhappiness and longing to be promoted to the top rank. This was followed by a statement that “she had never hinted that she would consider leaving.” This type of declaration is at the core of the management disconnect theme of the emerging theory because according to the manager’s statements, there were “hints” all over the place as mentioned earlier in the discussion of warning signs.

Further in the interview when I asked about possible pain points this employee might have mentioned around the time of this event he stated, “you always want to try to make the effort to help them because you assume they’re going to stay with the company . . . it’s sort of like you’re almost trying to talk yourself into ‘it will be ok.’”

When Participant 9 talked about the surprise loss of a seasoned employee that was clearly having trouble adjusting to much organizational change, he made the statement “I was surprised that she would leave the company . . . I wasn’t surprised that she was unhappy because that was obvious!”

These examples were a few of the more conspicuous references to the same disconnect that nearly everyone exhibited in their parallel recollections of warning signs alongside sentiments of shock. None of these leaders would want to believe that the work environment under their leadership was so negative that people were unhappy enough to leave. This would be

very upsetting and would give a senior leader the mental discomfort required to influence a change their perceptions about the environment. So, it seems plausible that as they experienced negative inputs and thoughts about some of the untenable conditions in the work environment, they could still be surprised when it led to employee decisions to leave.

Does the Cycle Repeat?

The sequence of events proposed by the emerging grounded theory (Figure 7) suggests a pattern of repetition of this experience for leaders. In the absence of any corrective forces or behavioral changes, and under the same circumstances with other employees, it seems logical to assume that this pattern of unplanned turnover could repeat itself. This thought process led me to ponder about my participants and more of their leadership history, curious about whether they had lost a professional subordinate multiple times. Finding out if this indeed occurred multiple times would support the notion of cycle learning failure for some leaders.

A brief follow-up question was circulated to my participants via email asking if they had experienced a sudden loss like the one discussed in our first interview more than once. I received only four responses, but two of them added some additional, unsolicited commentary about what they've learned through the experience of losing a professional employee. Two participants disclosed that they had experienced this type of loss more than once. However, without a complete understanding of the circumstances in these other situations I could not properly assume that the experience followed the same pattern of Trust, Shock, and Regret.

One participant responded about multiple unplanned losses stating, "In my years, I can think of two departures of key players that I didn't see coming . . . these were the exception and not the rule." Another participant also indicated having three loss experiences stating: "I can think of two other [prior] examples of people I didn't want to lose—either to lateral moves or leaving the company for more money."

While these participants acknowledge that they've experienced sudden losses of key employees several times, there isn't sufficient circumstantial information to understand the leader's role the separation. The length of time or career duration in these leadership positions is a relevant factor that several reminded me of in their responses to the question of multiple losses. They reminded me that over a long career, the probability of losing valuable people is higher and not unusual, and, that they learned from the experience nonetheless:

When you figure a career span lasting over 50 years having such occurrences is bound to happen . . . it depends greatly on the environment in which a person finds themselves; if the boss and company expresses true concern, respect and value for that individual then it would take an overt action by a third part for them to leave . . . it was important to always have an updated succession plan in case the unexpected happened

Noting that this participant's major loss experience discussed earlier was only because the employee wanted to start their own business, he reminds me that he is somewhat aware that organizational factors play a huge role in the decision to stay or leave. He also notes that one of the lessons learned over time is to be prepared for loss when it happens.

Another participant offered this wisdom from having several loss experiences:

So, I did learn a few valuable lessons (after losing employees) . . . that people are replaceable, even when you think they may not be; It's the boss's job to ensure continuity, and if someone was so valuable that their departure cripples a department or a function, then that boss is to blame for not having a plan. The other big thing I learned was that you have to stay true to the company and your principles.

This participant takes a firmer, more resolute philosophy about the relationship of employees and organizations. What he was referring to about "company and principles" was that his position was to not always "cave" to the demands of employees for accommodations if it would hurt the team or the company. He also echoes the previous comments about the importance of leaders being prepared for unplanned loss.

These additional examples of repeated losses for some leaders adds anecdotal support for the idea of a repeating cycle as suggested by the emerging theory. They also suggest an

opportunity for further research about how manager preparedness for losses affects their leadership style and perhaps their attitude towards key employees.

Chapter Conclusion: Emerging Theory of How Leaders Experience Voluntary Separation of Professionals

The theory that has emerged from the responses of leader participants is centered around a common, repeating cycle of events associated with the unplanned loss of a valuable employee (Figure 6). What I've observed from the findings is a "faulty" circular process of leader experiences associated with the turnover event. The participants described an initial Trust phase where the leader-employee relationship was cultivated and maintained in a manner consistent with normal expectation of a professional. The leader behavior in this stage was characterized by anticipation and performance expectations in an environment of professional respect and trust. Here, autonomy was the norm consistent with type of professionals under their wings. The second phase that emerged from the leader descriptions was a Shock phase as they learned about an employee resigning. Leaders described their frustrations, anger, and general disappointment at the whole situation. This led to the next phase in their narratives where they described reflection about what happened, looked at the bigger picture and attempted some rationalization, with most opening up about some feelings of guilt and empathy. This phase I called Regret as a general term, and it varied in intensity among different participants. The main theme of this phase was that they considered the possibility of their own fault but did not necessarily assign fault to themselves.

From their descriptions of the events and responses to my questions that probed for more detail about their management styles, I also noticed additional themes. Running concurrent to the

entire Trust-Shock-Regret cycle was a backdrop of negative environmental factors that could have been warnings to unhappiness and intentions to leave.

Figure 7 provides a visual representation of the overall grounded theory of how this entire experience of losing a key employee happens. The theory implies that what is simultaneous to the Trust-Shock-Regret cycle are conditions that fuel this negative leader experience cycle: high communication which in itself is a positive thing, warning signs, and management disconnect. Once the loss event has transpired, given a similar scenario and circumstances, the cycle could repeat if leaders are not learning from each departure experience. If the leader can understand the entire cycle holistically, it can become a teaching experience that would influence their future leadership behavior in order to avoid the same cycle all over again. This would of course create a more favorable employee environment and possibly reduce the unnecessary loss to the organization. Suggestions for how this cycle is supported through established theory, and recommendations for how organizations can help break this cycle are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter V: Discussion

This chapter engages current theory to discuss the new emerging theory of how leaders experience the voluntary loss of professional employees outlined in the previous section. I begin this chapter by reviewing relevant theoretical underpinnings that help explain the stages in the emerging grounded theory. Following this outline of relevant theories, I suggest a new “optimized” experience cycle that utilizes theory-based solutions as part of leader driven retention in the organization. I follow this up with a section of practical implications or “takeaways” that also emerged from what I learned from leaders in this study. The chapter concludes with opportunities for future research.

Interpretive Theoretical Framework

Several important motivation and leadership theories can help us understand leader behaviors and employee job satisfaction, which can also have substantial implications for turnover and retention (Table 2). These help to form a theoretical backbone that can help explain the leader experience sequence as proposed in the emerging grounded theory. Although motivation theory is highly advocated for in the literature for creating effective retention practices (Ramlall, 2004), I introduce additional social and leadership theories related to improving leadership practice. Several related theoretical concepts were introduced in chapter 2 and several more are now introduced in chapter 5 as the study has concluded, and, has revealed new processes that require more interpretation from the literature.

For better organization and understanding, I’ve divided these nine theories into two broader sections that focus on: (a) major things that may be going on with leaders in how they perceive or misperceive the working environment and their employee needs; and (b) major theories that leaders *and* the organization need to be aware of to stay on top of job satisfaction, motivation, and retention.

Table 2

Interpretive Theoretical Framework Theory Base

Theory type	Name	What may be happening with leaders	What leaders need to be aware of
Social / Leadership / Other	Cognitive dissonance	×	
	Fundamental attribution error	×	
	Leader member exchange		×
	Job embeddedness theory	×	×
		×	×
Motivation	Maslow's needs hierarchy		×
	McClelland's needs hierarchy		×
	Expectancy theory		×
	Equity theory		×
	Job characteristics theory		×

What May Be Happening With Leaders

The Shock phase of the experience sequence is essentially characterized in the findings as the time when the manager was surprised and caught off guard when an employee told them they were quitting. To offer plausible support for why the leader experienced so much shock at hearing this news, it is helpful to look at this event through the theoretical lens of cognitive dissonance, fundamental attribution error, and needs theory (Figure 10).

Ignoring the warnings. In the preceding chapter, the concept of management disconnect was used to illustrate the way in which leaders appear to experience warning signs yet remain “shocked” when they learn of an employee’s unhappiness and intention to quit. Several examples describe how leaders were aware of negative working environments and yet proceeded to describe how they were blindsided or caught off guard. Other examples detail experiences of leaders having conversations with unhappy employees either wanting more responsibility or expressing frustration during organizational change. In these situations, the leaders followed this

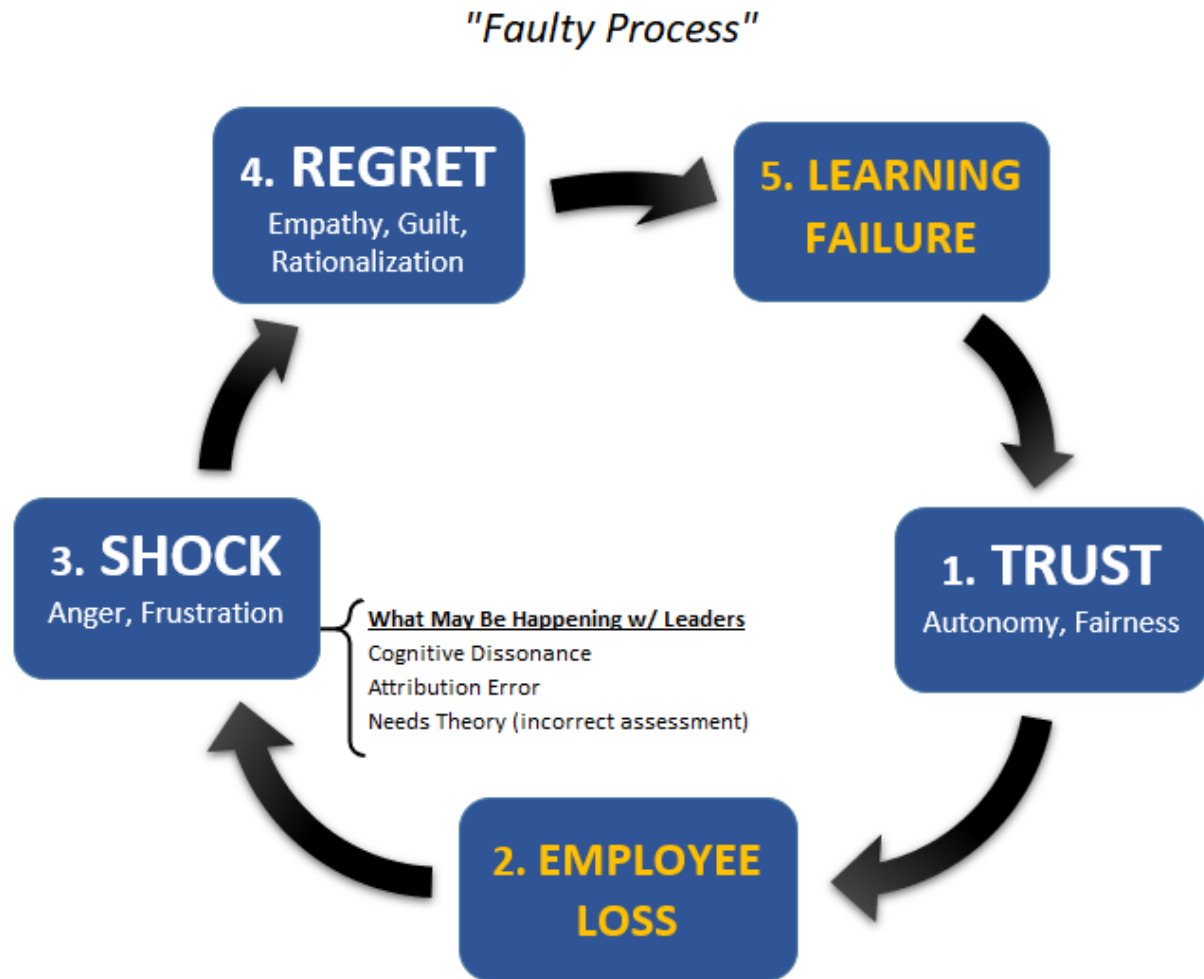


Figure 10. Emerging grounded theory: What may be happening with leaders.

recollection with similar statements about being shocked when they learned that the employee was quitting. Helping explain the Shock phase and the proposed connection between leader awareness of negative conditions and the eventual outcome of employee departure, it is helpful to understand some theory behind cognitive dissonance.

In the realm of Social Psychology there is a major, seminal theory known as cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) (see Figure 11) that, in simple terms, explains the behavioral responses to inconsistencies in our thoughts or actions. Built on the premise that all humans strive for internal consistency in our thoughts, Leon Festinger introduced cognitive dissonance theory

which explains that related thoughts or “cognitions” are either consonant (in harmony) or dissonant (unharmonious) (Festinger, 1957). A common illustration of CDT is the example of the cigarette smoker that knows how bad smoking is for his health yet continues to smoke because he finds it extremely pleasurable. These are dissonant cognitions and cause us discomfort, so, we will naturally seek to remedy this imbalance and discomfort in our conflicting thoughts. Further, the theory explains that we have three methods to reduce or eliminate these inconsistent cognitions:

1. change the cognition or the behavior,
2. add new thoughts to alter the magnitude of the dissonance, or
3. reduce the importance of the cognitions causing the disharmony.

So, in the example of the cigarette smoker, the person might try to read new information about how cigarette smoking isn’t as bad for everyone. Alternatively, the person could simply quit smoking although this is much more difficult.

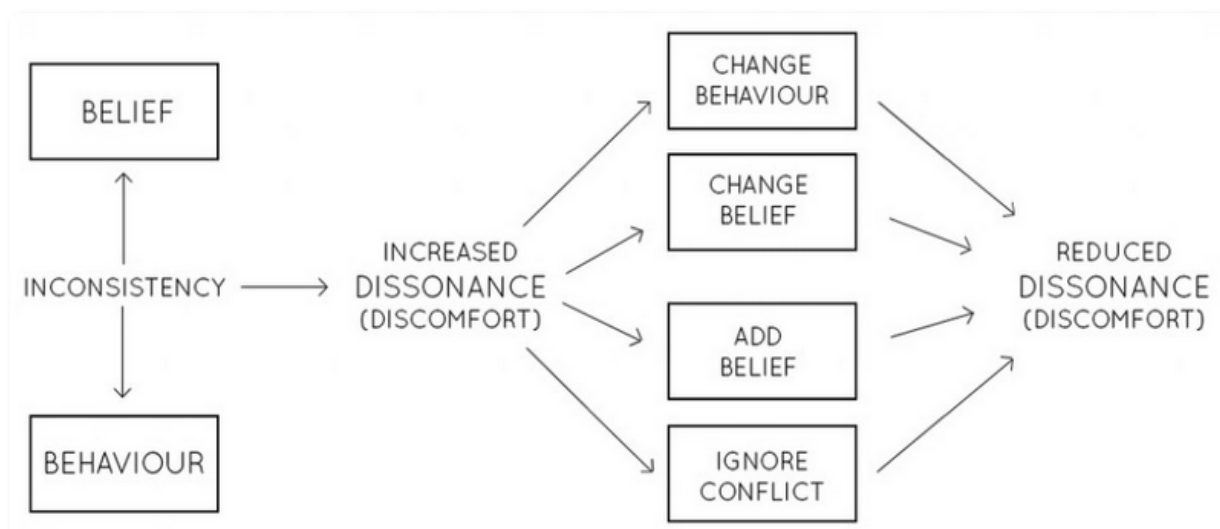


Figure 11. Cognitive dissonance theory.

Another example of CDT related to beliefs or values would be in the workplace where duties or directives needed to be enforced but they conflicted with your personal sense of right and wrong. In this case, dissonance would be very high and cause elevated stress to the point where you would have to act and change your attitude about the activity, or, change your behavior by possibly leaving the organization. Changing behaviors are usually much harder to do, so people generally opt for changing their attitude (cognition) (Harmon-Jones, E. & Harmon-Jones, C., 2007).

There have been several revisions and challenges to Festinger's original theory of cognitive dissonance, namely self-consistency, self-affirmation, and aversive consequence theories which all suggest more motivational explanations for the dissonance (Harmon-Jones, E. & Harmon-Jones, C., 2007). However, over the decades many of the revisions to CDT have been challenged in various experiments that have ended up supporting the original CDT premise of Festinger (Harmon-Jones, E. & Harmon-Jones, C., 2007; Hinojosa, Gardner, Walker, Coglisier, & Gullifor, 2016).

In the context of this study, cognitive dissonance theory suggests that participants likely attempted to reduce their mental discomfort by convincing themselves that the risk of somebody leaving was minimal, or that the conditions were not nearly as bad as they were being alluded to. This is the type of justification called for by dissonance theory because the thought of having unhappy employees or a deteriorated work environment might call into question the leader's strengths and decisions. Given that the stakes are generally high for a senior leader in an organization, this would not likely be well tolerated in their mind. The pervasive and constant pressure on leaders to protect and maintain their reputation, avoiding negative innuendo about their leadership ability is a major component of the entire organizational leadership process.

Misappropriating blame. In social psychology there is a concept known as Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958) that attempts to explain the cause of interpersonal behaviors. More specifically, the theory associates human behaviors as being explained by either internal (personal) or external (situational) attributions. This means that when we assign an internal attribution to a person's behavior we assume it's related to that person's ability, temperament, attitude, personality, etc. Conversely, when we attribute a behavior to external influences, we assume that the cause is related to the situation or environment and not something internal to the person. Fundamental Attribution Error (Ross, 1977) builds upon this concept and suggests that we have an over tendency to blame behaviors a person's behavior on internal (dispositional) factors—almost as an automatic, default response versus accepting that something in the situation drove the behavior.

In the context of leaders in this study, the Shock phase of the emerging theory suggests that leaders were unaware of negative working conditions, or, they were aware but chose to ignore or accept that this would lead to a separation. Attribution theory, and more specifically Attribution Error offers a theoretical basis for shock factor of separation as most of my participants were prone to blame the departure on the individual and their circumstances rather than themselves as part of the reason for leaving. This tendency to blame the person rather than the situation is predicted by attribution error. Were leaders to blame situational circumstances, it would turn the focus on themselves as potentially responsible for somebody deciding to leave because they either allowed negative working conditions to persist, or they were not keeping tabs on the needs of their employees. The implication here, related to the loss examples of participants 1 through 3, is that leaders expressing frustration and anger at an individuals who quit abruptly might learn more from the situation by first asking themselves how they might have

contributed. This self-examination, if at all, seemed to come later in the process for some participants during the regret phase once the situation had transpired.

Misunderstanding needs. Motivation can be thought of as a psychological process that causes arousal, direction, and persistence of voluntary actions (Mitchell, 1982). In an organizational context, it can also be described as a willingness to exert high levels of effort toward organizational goals with the condition that this effort satisfies some personal, individual need (Robbins & Judge, 2012). Motivation theory has been studied and applied to organizational performance, retention, and job satisfaction of employees for decades. Lumped into two major categories, motivation theories are usually thought of as either content or “needs” theories, and process or “cognitive” theories. The older, content theories which are needs-based and deal with the questions of what determines work motivation, and the process theories explain how and why motivation occurs inside a person (Kanfer, 1990). Understanding motivation theory is part of a necessary foundation for all management to achieve retention of employees by enhancing job satisfaction, increasing performance, and ultimately decreasing turnover (Ramlall, 2004). As we’ve established, turnover can be very costly to an organization and limit its performance and competitive advantage.

In the context of this study, motivation theories help further our understanding of the Shock phase proposed in the emerging grounded theory, as well as explain elements related to employee turnover and retention. Given the extreme importance of retention and turnover mitigation in organizations, recognizing some underlying theoretical explanations of motivation can help leaders learn how to be pro-active in the management of professionals.

Maslow’s needs hierarchy. One of the earliest, most influential, and most widely referenced theories of motivation was put forth by Abraham Maslow in 1943. Basically, he

proposed that humans have basic psychological needs that can be categorized and ranked, and that needs are satisfied in a hierarchical order (Maslow, 1943). Typically pictured as a pyramid (Figure 12), Maslow proposed that our basic human needs are internal, built from the ground up starting with the most basic (physiological) and rising to the highest level, self-actualization. These needs, he proposed, could only be fulfilled once the lower, preceding need was satisfied first. This needs hierarchy has important implications within organizations and especially for management to understand what the underlying, unmet needs are of each employee because they will not attempt to fulfill higher needs until the lower needs are met. This order of needs according to Maslow is the same for all people and should be understood as key motivators in all contexts including within organizations.

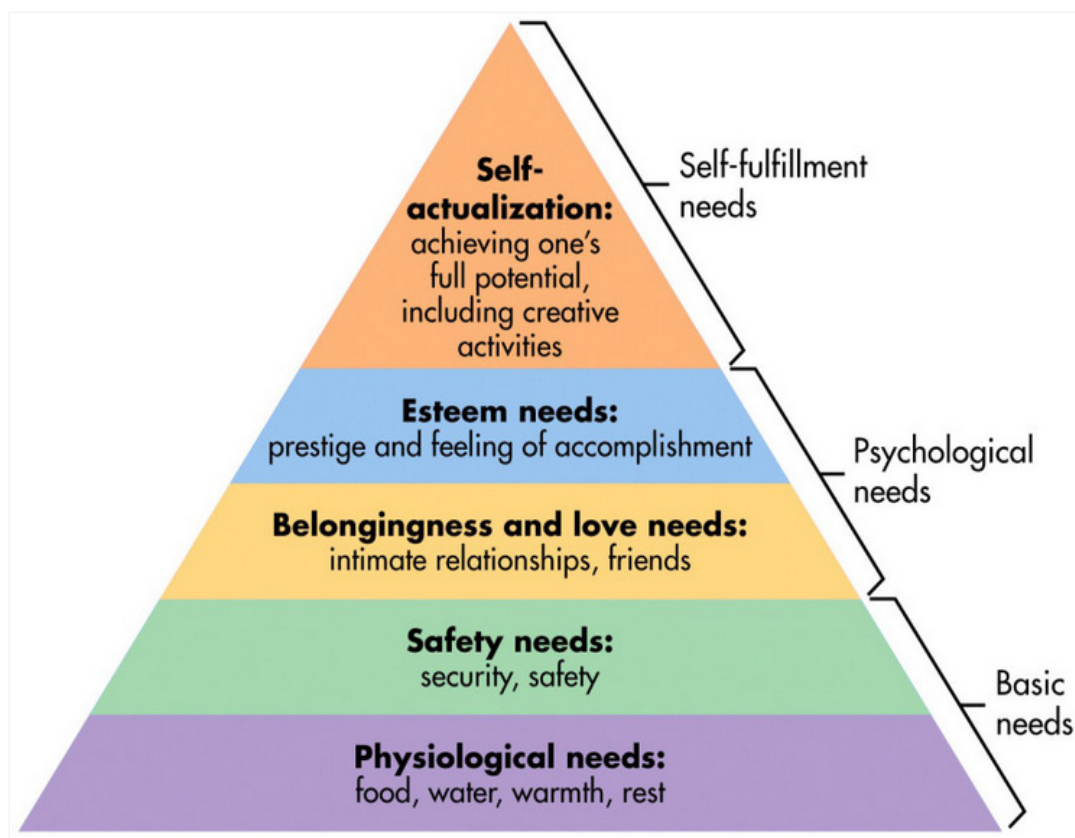


Figure 12. Maslow's needs hierarchy (Source: simplypsychology.org).

Maslow's needs hierarchy has important implications for organizational behavior in the context of this study as it can help explain some of the Shock phase and Warning Signs of the proposed emerging theory in the way that leaders reacted to unexpected loss. Regarding warning signs, I previously described several "red flag" behaviors that were mentioned by leaders such as when the employee expressed unhappiness with the job, felt disenfranchised and not valued, wanted more responsibility, or was concerned about organizational restructuring. These examples could be attached generally to the higher order needs of Maslow's hierarchy as they are related to psychological needs for esteem and needing to feel accomplished and appreciated. However, in the example of the worry and frustration during corporate restructuring (participants 8 & 9), these are lower level needs for safety/security as the employee would have economic concerns in protecting their income in the event of a layoff, plus the added psychological concern of dealing with the instability and insecurity surrounding all the organizational change.

The shock phase of the emerging theory is used to describe the leaders shock, anger, and frustration upon learning that their subordinate was leaving. Several expressed that their first inclination was to attempt to retain them with economic rewards such as offering higher compensation or improved working conditions like working remotely. According to the needs hierarchy, this would be an example misinterpreting the employee's true need because the leaders were erroneously focused on satisfying lower level needs (money) when in actuality the employee had unmet needs of a higher level (esteem, prestige, accomplishment). Part of the leader's shock when confronted with the employee loss could stem from this misunderstanding and miscalculation of what their professional subordinates really needed in their roles.

The immense popularity of Maslow's hierarchy over the decades, however, has spawned multitudes of criticisms, reexaminations, and other challenges in the literature. One recent study

was done to test the needs hierarchy in the context of working conditions in the 21st century, examining the needs of 519 workers from a wide range of occupations ranging from nonprofessionals to professionals (Uysal, Aydemire, & Genc, 2017). The study concluded that the order of needs as prescribed by Maslow was significantly different in most of these professions, citing esteem needs as dominant, preceding even safety and social needs just above physiological needs. What this suggests is that modern managers need to understand the changed landscape of the workforce today, even at the highest professional levels, because of the changes in socialization today. With newer generations such as millennials entering more senior level professional roles, older leaders need to adapt and adjust their understanding of employees' top priorities, especially their need for autonomy which ranks higher than ever (Uysal et al., 2017).

McClelland's needs theory. Where Maslow's needs hierarchy was based on a set of fixed, human needs that are immediate and sequential, psychologist David McClelland built upon this and proposed that our internal needs are built or acquired over time, based on our experiences (McClelland, 1961). He proposed that we generally have three major life motivators—a need for achievement, a need for affiliation, and a need for power. Individuals with a high need for achievement require challenges, mastery, accomplishment, and need to prove their competence. Similar to the higher order needs proposed by Maslow, individuals with a high need for achievement prefer challenging projects. Those with a high need for affiliation favor relationships, having a need for love and relatedness, and want to belong to a group. Those having a high need for power like to control and influence others, favoring to lead and organize people or their work. This last group tends to make the most effective and productive leaders as they are often the least risk-averse coupled with a desire to influence, coach, and encourage (Kreitner, 1998).

In the context of this study, and similar to the needs associations from Maslow's hierarchy, a leader needs to recognize and play to their subordinate's greatest need to be most effective. It seems logical that improper assessment or failure to understand the true motivators of your subordinates is a risky proposition that could lead to turnover. Most of the seasoned professionals that quit in my participant examples skewed towards needs for affiliation and power based on the descriptions provided. If the participant leaders failed to regard these needs, or completely misinterpreted them all together, this would further promote the concept of Shock upon losing them as suggested in the emerging theory. Whatever the dominant motivator is for an individual, it's wise for managers to try to learn what it is and use this information to set goals, provide appropriate feedback, and reward them in ways that align with their needs.

The combination of theory on cognitive dissonance, attribution, and human needs can help explain the Shock phase of the emerging grounded theory. Together they provide a theoretical backing for why a manager might react with shock, anger, and frustration when suddenly losing a key employee. This combination helps to explain what may be happening with leaders amidst an environment of warning signs and adequate communication suggesting "crossed-wires" somewhere in their assessment of the working environment during the Trust phase.

What Leaders May Need to Be Aware Of

The experience sequence characterized as "faulty" concludes with the suggestion that the leader is failing to learn from the unplanned loss experience (Figure 13). The opportunity for leaders and the organization at large to alter this process could begin with better understanding of the complex mix of reasons why people leave an organization. Existing literature on motivation, leadership, and turnover can help leaders understand:

- What are the essential motivations of employees?

- The importance interpersonal relationships and connections between employees and organizations

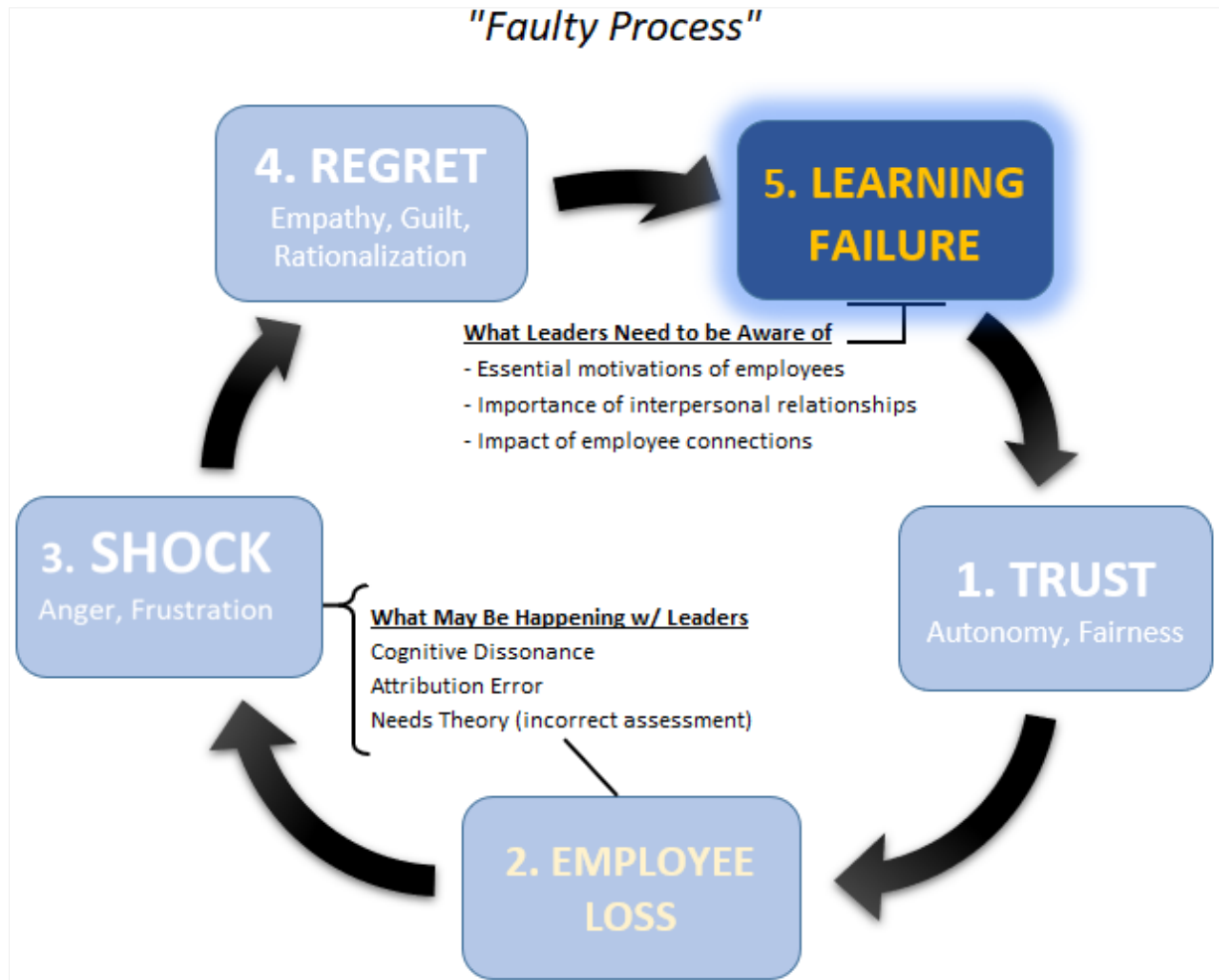


Figure 13. Emerging grounded theory: What leaders need to be aware of.

Understanding employee working environments and individual circumstances is crucial for leaders to maintain awareness of their employee's needs in order to avoid unplanned turnover. The loss scenarios discussed with the participants in this study echoed several teachings from existing literature that have useful application here.

A deeper understanding of internal drivers that might have influenced the job satisfaction and employee decisions to leave can be appreciated through the lens of these theories:

- needs theory
- expectancy theory
- equity theory
- job characteristics theory
- leader–member exchange theory
- job embeddedness theory

Essential motivations of employees. Needs theory—under the motivation umbrella—was just presented as part of a useful explanation for a manager’s shock at suddenly losing a key employee because they incorrectly assessed their employee’s true needs. In terms of turnover prevention, the understanding and use of Maslow’s hierarchy also offers a number of ideal opportunities for leaders to promote a work environment tailored to individuals, thus creating a more engaging, productive work environment. This can be accomplished by designing programs or practices aimed at satisfying unmet or emerging needs (Ramlall, 2004). Some examples of this would be, in the case of lower order needs, attractive benefits, wages and retirement programs, in addition to recognition and award programs (basic/safety). For higher order needs, team building activities to encourage social interaction, challenging job assignments, allowing delegation, and giving autonomy are all examples along the upper needs spectrum (psychological/fulfillment). Essentially, managers have a responsibility to understand their employees’ needs and to create an environment where people can develop to their fullest potential.

Several examples of employee loss in this study demonstrate the necessity of having a clear “line of sight” between performance and reward so that employees are clear how their

efforts will affect them. This clarity, however, can also be shortsighted because the rewards also need to be regarded highly by the employee. As with the example in this study from Participant 5 who lost a valuable professional that wanted to start their own company, no amount of internal rewards would ultimately motivate the employee to stay because it was not possible within their current organization. Additionally, research indicates that pay growth for high-performing employees has far greater implications on retention than job satisfaction (Nyberg, 2010). As with several participant examples, the temptation to leave for a competitor offering more money was high which is common for high-performers because pay growth at their professional levels would be limited. Another motivation theory, expectancy theory is one of the most widely pursued and accepted theories of workplace motivation, whose tenets relate well to the preceding examples of connections between effort and reward. Leaders need to be aware of expectancy theory because it posits that an individual's motivation is directly linked to an "appraisal" process that can lead to desired outcomes.

First proposed by Victor Vroom in 1964, expectancy theory states that the level of our tendency to continue acting in certain way is predicated on our belief that (a) our efforts will lead to performance (expectancy), (b) that this performance will lead to rewards (instrumentality), and (c) that those rewards (outcomes) are important to us and in sync with our overarching goals (valence; Vroom, 1964). In practical terms, expectancy theory can be conceptualized such as when a worker is motivated to exert "extra" effort if he or she believes that this will lead to increased performance (Step 1), and that the performance will lead to reward (Step 2), and that this type of reward is meaningful to them and consistent with their personal goals (Step 3). This concept clarifies why an employee may exert just enough effort to complete the job and not overachieve because in their mind, the ultimate outcome is not something that they hold in high

regard or importance. No matter what the employer feels is motivational or even how much you explain that their contribution is valuable, it really depends on what the individual holds valuable that matters. Add to that, the employee's goals may not fit within the organization, so in that scenario, it will very tough to motivate somebody toward higher performance.

Expectancy theory's basic premise is supported with decades of literature. Although not without its critics, studies validate the basic nature of the theory's reliance on "perceptions" and "beliefs" held by an individual about a situation rather than actions or behavior (Van Eerde & Thierry, 1996). As a predictor of turnover, expectancy theory provides one rationale for how compensation and performance interact because higher performers will want a closer connection between performance and rewards (Nyberg, 2010). Expectancy theory has been shown to apply to training effectiveness and motivation (Mathieu, Tannenbaum, & Salas, 1992), and lost productivity and motivation in performance groups (Shepperd, 1993), the latter suggesting that leaders should provide incentives and emphasize the indispensable nature of an individual's contribution.

Of utmost importance is that leaders pay close attention to employee perceptions of fairness and justice (equity) in the workplace in order to better understand and address various employee attitudes. In this regard and similar to expectancy theory addressing the link between effort and reward, equity theory posits that within an organization, people will naturally seek an equal ratio of inputs to outcomes when comparing themselves to others (Adams, 1963). Essentially, how does my reward for effort stack up against the same rewards of my peers? When an inequity is perceived, individuals will take action to correct the inequity by altering some or more of the components of the equation to reduce the "equity tension" that is occurring.

In the loss example from Participant 2, a highly skilled professional left the organization after being demoted during a corporate merger. The employee felt “disrespected” and “belittled” because the perception was that talent levels and experience were suddenly disregarded as job titles were “level set” across the organization as part of the reorganization. This employee was now at a lower level job title than he felt his experience warranted, and, he was now on the same level as more junior-level professionals. According to equity theory, when such equity tension exists, two of the major “corrective actions” that an employee will choose from are to either reduce their efforts and performance (inputs) or leave the organization all together.

Fundamental to the perception of value to the organization, compensation and benefits need to be tied to performance as a motivator for most people. Further, higher performers are especially susceptible to inequity perceptions and feeling under rewarded thus posing the highest risk for turnover (Nyberg, 2010). In another example, Participant 7 was confronted by a senior level professional that disclosed that she’d been offered significantly more compensation for the same role and was considering leaving. The goal in this confrontation was to demonstrate to her manager her equity or value to another firm in hopes of getting a promotion in her current company. According to Adams, equity theory is primarily focused on equitable compensation rewards (pay outcomes) and indicates that individuals generally feel either overpaid or underpaid. Although the validity of Adam’s theory on inequity has been challenged regarding methodological processes that could lead to alternate interpretations of subjects’ perceptions of inequity (Goodman & Friedman, 1971), for the most part, equity theory is considered a strong foundation for analyzing employee perceptions of fairness within their organization.

Both expectancy and equity theories provide rationales for the behaviors of high-performing employees and their inclinations to leave an organizations. The examples from this

study of professionals that quit support the theoretical concept of a perceived “mismatch” between the organization objectives and personal motivators. It is therefore extremely important for retention effectiveness that managers become aware of their employees’ major underlying motivators and personal goals rather than just assuming it’s always pay. Additionally, they need to be aware of the deeper psychological motivations at work when balancing duties and rewards across their teams.

The last theory discussed under the motivation umbrella, job characteristics theory, proposes several impactful ideas for improvements or construction of job design which ultimately impacts employee motivation and retention. Optimal job design has been identified in the literature as a crucial component to employee motivation and thus job satisfaction and retention. Basically, job characteristics theory posits that employee satisfaction is tied to the achievement of three psychological states: meaningfulness of work, personal responsibility for outcomes, and awareness or knowledge of your effectiveness (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). According the job characteristics model, feeding these three psychological states are five core job characteristics: skill variety, task identity, and task significance assist in achieving meaningfulness, while job autonomy stimulates a sense of responsibility, and finally, feedback provides the awareness and communicates one’s effectiveness. Job characteristics theory was critical in helping to bridge the research gap and demonstrate the relationship between job design and work-related outcomes by defining these three psychological states.

These five major job characteristics are defined as follows.

- Skill variety: when a job requires multiples talents there is more internal motivation.

This has strong implications for training and development of an employee because it

underscored the need to assess learning/knowledge deficiencies, as well as demonstrates the commitment to their development.

- Task identity: stresses the importance of having well-defined, identifiable tasks or outcomes in one's work to be able to see your output clearly and understand your contribution.
- Task significance: stresses the degree to which a job has substantial impact on the life of others or the organization.
- Autonomy: is regarded as the degree to which an employee has freedom, discretion, and independence in doing their job. As a motivator, this component of job characteristics theory is also supported by the needs theories of both Maslow and McClelland as a higher order need and a component of the achievement need respectively. Autonomy has particular relevance to this study because, as previously discussed, was a component present in the Trust phase of the leader experience sequence proposed by the emerging theory. The professionals managed by the participant leaders enjoyed significant autonomy in their roles and were expected to be self-sufficient. In addition, many of these professional subordinates possessed unique skills or were managers of teams, so personal responsibility in their organizational roles was high. This, as suggested by job characteristics theory is critical to fostering a sense of accountability and responsibility for one's own success and failure (Ramlall, 2004). From a retention standpoint, autonomy in job design should be highly regarded, taking into consideration flexible or remote work schedules as one possible arrangement. As a retention tool, autonomy for

professionals would be a requirement, however as demonstrated in this study, would not necessarily predict reduced turnover.

- Feedback: relates to how well an employee is informed about their results and effectiveness and is directly responsible for a critical psychological state of knowing your results. Hackman & Oldham (1980) suggest that feedback about performance is critical to impacting turnover and absenteeism. This suggests that leaders and organizations should place a high priority on performance feedback mechanisms such as periodic reviews, or even less formal evaluations through routine one-on-one meetings as a mechanism for retention. Most of the leaders in this study practiced routinized communication by way of scheduled one-on-one time with their subordinates, and as stated previously in the findings, this was a high priority for the senior leaders I interviewed. Additionally, proper exit interviews are another example of a process driven by Human Resources that would facilitate learning about root causes of turnover in the organization. This in turn could provide necessary feedback to leaders about their employee losses that would hopefully reduce turnover.

Recent updates to JCT by Hackman & Oldham (2010) suggest modifying the theory to place greater importance on social aspects of motivation in job design. These modifications are reflective of the more contemporary needs of employees today and include allowances for employees to self-design their roles to enrich the employment experience.

Figure 14 provides a visual recap of the motivation theories covered in this chapter and their relationship to retention practices and improved outcomes. From a theoretical standpoint, all of these have the potential to improve turnover in an organization if they are understood and implemented as part of an organizational retention strategy. Many aspects related to job

satisfaction and motivation from these theories rest in the hands of individual leaders while others are more the domain of human resources departments.

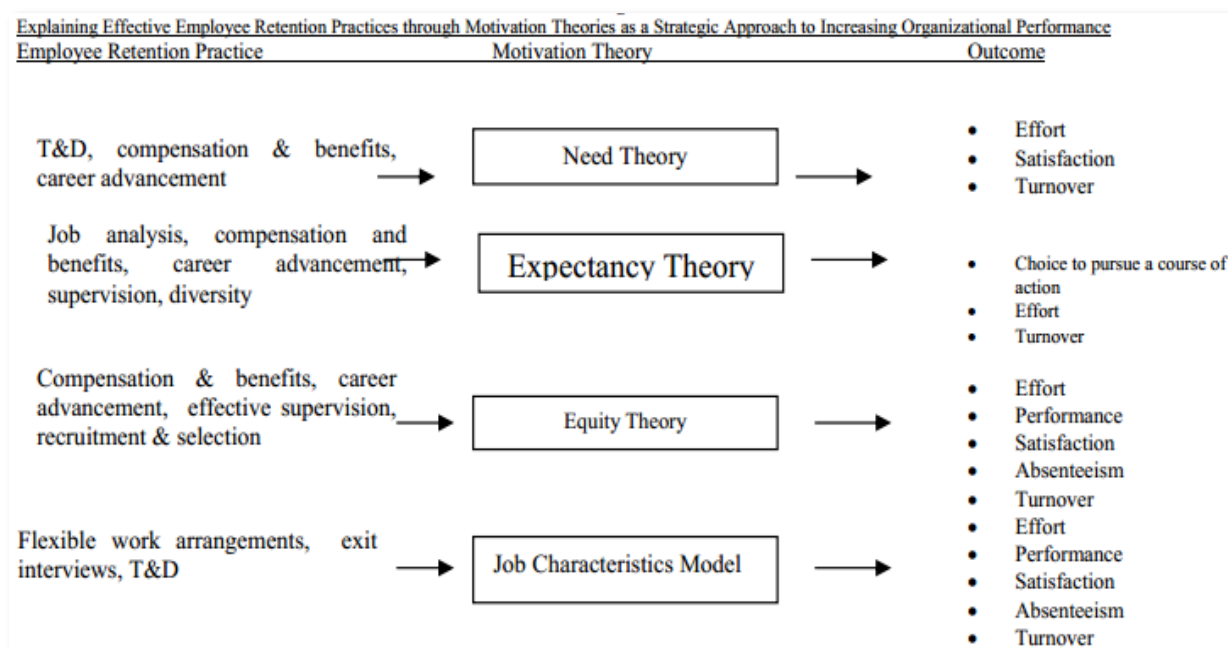


Figure 14. Summary of retention practices, motivation theories, and outcomes. Reprinted from “A Review of Employee Motivation Theories and their Implications for Employee Retention within Organizations,” by S. Ramlall, 2004, *Journal of American Academy of Business*, 5(1/2), 52-63.

Importance of relationships. Initially theorized in the 1970s and has remained one of the most studied concepts in leadership, leader member exchange theory (LMX) is a relationship-based theory of leadership that assumes leaders influence followers through the relationship they develop with them (Erodogan & Bauer, 2015). It proposes that over time, as a leader learns more about team members, relationships and personal opinions are forged which turn into individualized modes of interaction and treatment of each team member, favoring some members more than others. The participants in this study indicated varying degrees of interpersonal connections with their employees that left abruptly, ranging from close, long-term

relationships to more less personal, more transactional types of interactions. Even so, the trust phase of the leader experience sequence was characterized by all participants as including high levels of trust and fairness which are core components of high-quality leader–member relationships. It could be assumed that for most of the leader–follower relationships in this study, positive relationships had been cultivated in the early stages because these subordinates that left the organization were higher ranking professionals that had been given much responsibility in their roles. What is noteworthy and inconsistent with LMX theory is that high levels of satisfaction and commitment are predicted, however the employees referenced in my participant examples ultimately quit. This suggests that other factors were likely contributors to their satisfaction and commitment such as aspects of motivation theory discussed later.

Effectively, LMX provides a framework that helps to explain the issue of favor and disfavor of certain employees and its benefits and consequences in organizations. During the early stages of the relationship, followers are subconsciously placed in either in-groups or out-groups by the leader. Employees in the in-group have high-quality relationships with their leader, have the highest levels of trust, receive better treatment and attention, enjoy more one-on-one time, and are often similar in personality. Employees in a low-quality relationships (out-group) do not benefit from the attention, access, or opportunities of the in-group, and are not as trusted or given as many opportunities for advancement in the organization (Dienesch & Liden, 1986).

From a retention standpoint, it is important for leaders to understand how this theory applies to them in their relationships with subordinates. It's important for leaders to understand whom you have placed in either "out groups" or "in groups" and why you have done this because it can have tremendous implications on commitment, performance, and turnover. A recent, substantial study was done on the relationship of LMX to follower performance and

concluded that LMX is changing how the research community views the importance of leader–follower relationship theories vs. motivation and fairness theories (Gottfredson & Aguinis, 2017). In fact, this massive meta-analysis that reviewed the most popular leadership behaviors and the impact on performance concluded that LMX is the single largest and most predictive pathway to explaining the leader–follower performance relationship (p. 575). It is suggested that the root of this connection lies in the psychological safety and distraction that is instilled by a follower’s perception of a good relationship with their leader (Gottfredson & Aguinis, 2017). As the perception of their relationship improves, improved performance follows. LMX theory provides a well-grounded basis for leader responsibility in the retention of followers.

Employee connections. A more recent theoretical concept, job embeddedness theory seeks to help explain the collective forces that influence a person to stay in their job. Focused on retention, job embeddedness looks at the collective “veil” or “web” of forces, inside and outside of the job, that influence one to stay on the job as opposed to the negative aspects that prompt one to leave (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, & Erez, 2001). Organized into 3 major dimensions of links, fit, and sacrifice, the theory also proposes that each of these dimensions has both an organizational and a community dimension which combine to create six dimensions of embeddedness together. Combining all these into six elements of retention, job embeddedness theory offers a new understanding for why people get “stuck” in their occupation and offers leaders and organizations more aspects to consider when addressing voluntary turnover.

From the examples of employee loss in this study it becomes somewhat obvious that internal and external connections were influential in the decision to leave. Participant 1 lost a senior manager that was torn between his job and external obligations to care for a family

member. Another professional that quit to start his own business most certainly weighed the internal connections to the organization against the greater opportunity for self-growth.

The job embeddedness dimensions can be explained accordingly:

- **Links:** the extent to which people have links to other people or activities, formal or informal. Embeddedness suggests that a number of strands connect an employee and his or her family in a social, psychological, and financial web that includes work and nonwork friends, groups, the community, and the physical environment in which he or she lives. The higher the number of links between the person and the web, the more an employee is bound to the job and the organization (Mitchell et al., 2001).
- **Fit:** an employee's perceived compatibility or comfort with an organization and with his or her environment. An employee's personal values, career goals and plans for the future must "fit" with the larger corporate culture and the demands of his or her immediate job (job knowledge, skills and abilities). In addition, a person will consider how well he or she fits the community and surrounding environment. The better the fit, the higher the likelihood that an employee will feel professionally and personally tied to the organization (Mitchell et al., 2001).
- **Sacrifice:** the perceived cost of material or psychological benefits that may be forfeited by leaving one's job such work relationships, tasks that you enjoy, etc. The more an employee gives up when leaving, the more difficult it is to sever employment with the organization.

Community sacrifices (as well as links and fit to some extent) are mostly an issue if one has to relocate. Leaving a community that is attractive, safe and where one is liked or respected

can be difficult. Although off-the-job embeddedness may be more crucial when relocation is involved, it could be very important even for situations only requiring a change in jobs (Mitchell et al., 2001).

What is important about job embeddedness in the context of this study is that leaders need to recognize the signs of embeddedness, or more specifically, absence of embeddedness factors as a possible antecedent to turnover. Obviously, many of these connections that we all have to work colleagues and our communities are personal, organizational fit is something that leaders should have an understanding of with each subordinate. Important to note about job embeddedness theory is that being embedded in your job does cause one to increase these work or social linkages. Rather, those existing linkages cause a person to become embedded. Critically, research on job embeddedness has found it to be a better and more reliable predictor of turnover -even better than correlations with job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Mitchell et al., 2001).

Summary of Theoretical Framework

The preceding theoretical framework has relevance to the emerging grounded theory because it both outlines several theories from the existing literature that help explain key events in the faulty cycle and, offers theory-backed recommendations for improvements by leaders to positively impact retention.

1. From a leader perception and awareness standpoint, the emerging theory's faulty process highlights awareness deficiencies and misperceptions of the job/employee conditions leading to turnover, shock and regret. We now have several theoretical influences that offer support for these stages by way of cognitive dissonance, attribution theory, and needs theories that help us understand what may be happening with leaders in organizations (Figure 10). Leaders are continually noted in the more

- recent literature for misapprehending the true needs of their employees, placing wages as the top need when in reality the true need is a better working environment, interesting work, better job design, or some other higher order need (Kovach, 1995; Uysal et al., 2017). It's circumstances like these that highlight the problem of incongruence between managers' perceptions and employees' perceptions of the working environment. The misapprehension by leaders of the true individual priorities which are different than those suggested by Maslow and McClelland could help explain the surprise and shock in the emerging grounded theory.
2. From a retention and turnover standpoint, the knowledge from motivation theory also helps to inform decisions about leader and organizational approaches to leader-directed retention. Motivation theory informs us about both human needs (Maslow, McClelland) and human processes (expectancy, equity, & job characteristics theories) as components that leaders and Human Resource departments (HR) need to be aware of to help them to reduce unplanned turnover. Also critical in the understanding of employee needs, managers and HR should be aware that priorities of individual needs might have changed over time as generational, socioeconomic, and social concerns have influenced a changing landscape of human needs (Kovach, 1995; Uysal et al., 2017). Simply put, today many individual priorities are different than those suggested by some of the classic needs literature. Additional literature about how people perceive fairness and set career goals (equity & expectancy theories) can help tremendously with how compensations and rewards plans are developed. Further, leaders and HR can benefit from understanding job characteristics theory when designing a job, refining job descriptions, or deciding on the appropriate scope of

duties that would complement higher skilled employees like those referenced in this study. Outside of motivational theory, research about the importance of leader follower relationships (LMX) and personal connectedness to jobs and community (embeddedness) can help leaders understand and address higher level influences on retention.

Implications and Recommendations

The results of this study offer insights for recommendations and implications for leader and organizational practice, theory development, and future research. I have offered several theoretical explanations for the events in the proposed grounded theory as well as suggestions for how motivation and leadership theory can help with leader awareness and retention. Reducing unplanned turnover is possible if leaders and organizations make the efforts to take a proactive approach. Leaders have the responsibility to learn and become as aware as possible of the needs and happiness of their employees, and, to be aware of their own contribution to the problem. Unplanned turnover can be diminished through a broader system of leader-directed employee support, increased situational awareness, and proactive learning and assessment of retention success.

Figure 15 outlines the desired optimized leadership process of leader experience that illustrates breaking this dysfunctional cycle of loss proposed in the emerging grounded theory. The leader experience sequence as originally conceived (Figure 6) was based on data from my participants and missing theoretical support for understanding leader experiences, turnover causes, and retention strategy. An organization can greatly benefit from the wealth of scientific knowledge that exists about employee behavior, motivation, job satisfaction, turnover, retention, and leadership theory. A learning organization can reduce the very costly and damaging fallout from losing key employees. As management learns from its experiences with loss, the frustration

that results from misperception could be reduced because leaders are informed and aware of factors inside and outside their domains that affect employees. Using that knowledge to influence leader behavior and make them better managers is the core of any retention solution to the emerging grounded theory.

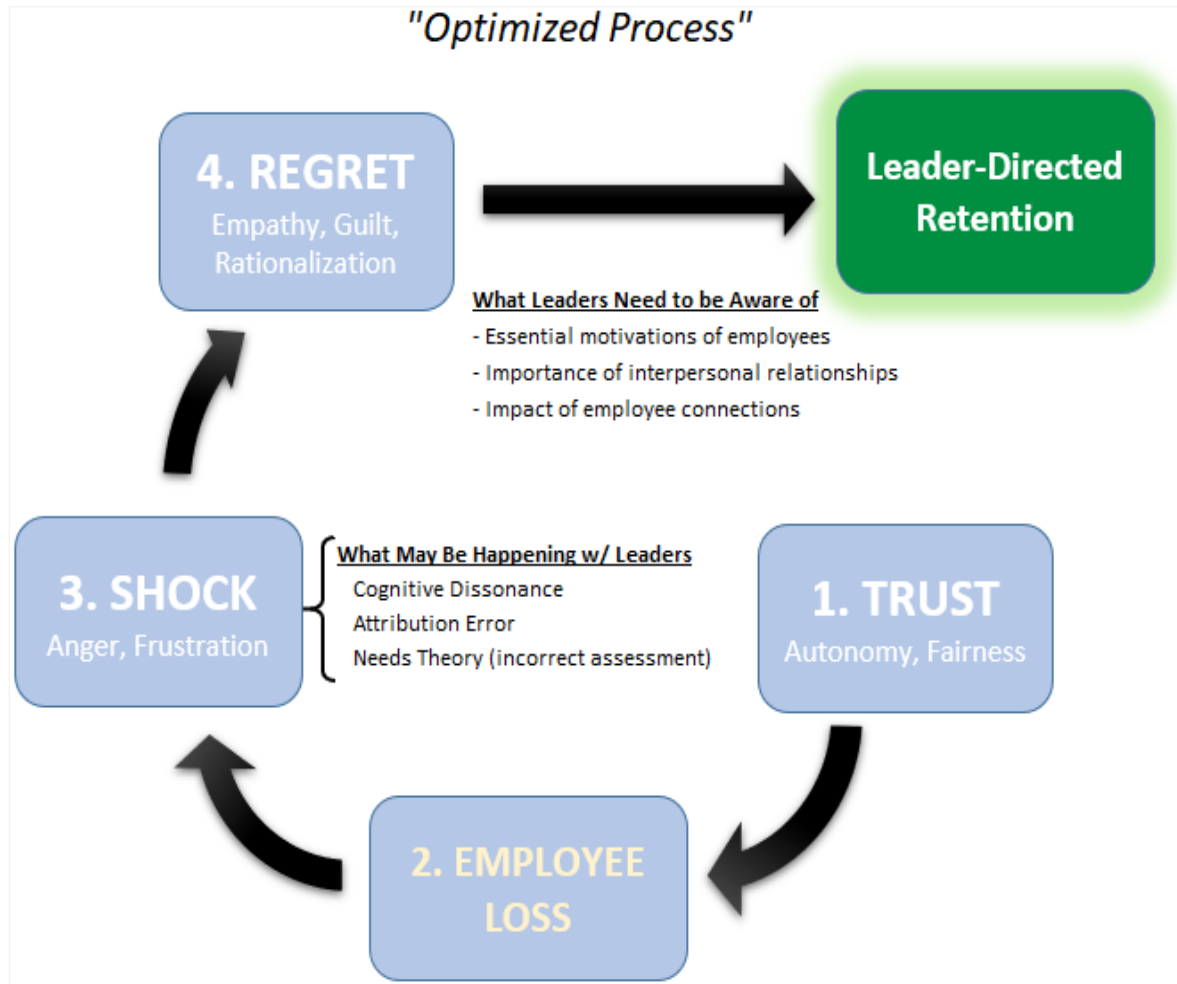


Figure 15. Optimized leader experience sequence.

Leader-directed retention.

Employee-focused support. Competing priorities and time constraints are consistent with senior leadership. This was echoed in the conversations with my participants, however some

referred to formal leadership training in their careers that did not always translate into practice. It stands to reason and is consistent with what I heard in the interviews that senior leaders are very busy people and don't always have time for employee development or creating ideal working environments. I know this as well from my own experience having ascended the ranks to having a team of professionals of my own, yet also having less interpersonal time to get to interact one-on-one. It is therefore imperative that leaders continually reinforce to employees how valuable they are to the organization. This practice should become a high-level priority just as with other priorities.

- The literature supports this assertion about how critical organizational support of employees is, and how turnover can be avoided by communicating to employees how valued they are to the organization. Perceived organizational support (POS) is described as an employee's perception of how an organization values one's contributions and cares about their well-being (Neves & Eisenberger, 2012). The loss examples from participants 2 and 9 during a time of organizational change such as with a merger were characteristic of the pitfalls of *low* perceived organizational support because the company let them down at a time when they needed support from the organization to have their best interest. Times of great organizational change such as with a merger are stressful because of all the uncertainty and fear of job loss. When POS is diminished, commitment is low, and in the example from Participant 2 where the programmer was given a lesser title during a reorganization, this was perceived as a demotion. This would contribute to seriously eroded POS and organizational commitment (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Lynch, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 1999; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Moorman et al., 1998). These were opportune times when a

leader, if they made the effort, could step up to support and listen to their team's concerns. An example from Participant 9 was losing a tenured professional during a reorganization that spoke about having extreme discomfort with all the change. This likely contributed to a heightened sense of helplessness that has been shown to reduce perceived organizational support (Lynch, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 1999).

- Senior leaders expect self-sufficiency, performance, and maturity from their teams. For all the best communication practices and importance placed on one-on-one time, there is still a lot of opportunity for dissatisfaction among employees. What I gathered from the leaders in this study was a sense of high-performance expectations and autonomy—both of which are consistent with managing higher skilled, knowledge-worker-type employees. This doesn't portend improvements to the overall problem of turnover of higher skilled workforces but rather suggests that turnover is a risk that will endure. It takes pro-active effort on the part of leaders, or accountability in some fashion for excessive turnover to entice action and more focus on your employees.

Better situational awareness. In chapter 4, I outlined a structure of leader experiences related to the unexpected loss of a key professional subordinates. Throughout the narratives from each participant it became clear that a number of indications that I referred to as “warning signs” were present, and, at least somewhat obvious. The term situational awareness is classically used in reference to military and aviation contexts, but I think it can be appropriately used in leadership contexts as well. It is defined generally as the integration of knowledge based on repeating situational assessments—which are themselves complex observations (Endsley, 2000).

The fact that all participants experienced sudden, unforeseen loss of subordinates indicates that perhaps their level of awareness of prevailing conditions or circumstances was

deficient in some regard. The conditions that led to these “quits” from the perspective of the leader’s recollections were mostly related to internal issues in the workplace, and a few examples were related to external, personal reasons of the employee. Nevertheless, the participant leaders had some opportunity in their role as manager to either intervene in a developing situation to reduce frustration, modify a role, accommodate a changing need, or take the time to personally assess the issue. These are the responsibilities of leaders and a requirement of them to act in the best interest of the organizations they serve by being receptive to signals whether negative or positive and not denying that they exist. Leaders simply need to pay attention to red flags and listen to their employees needs and even subtle suggestions.

As discussed, the loss of even one professional-level employee can be very costly to the organization in several regards. The costs associated with recruiting, hiring, and training can cost upwards of 100% or greater of that person’s salary, in addition to the indirect costs of reduced morale, service disruption, institutional knowledge loss and others (Cascio, 2006; Allen et al., 2010). Cognitive dissonance appears to a factor in a leader’s diminished situational awareness because it implies a natural tendency to ignore red flags. The implication is that cognitive dissonance could erode or seriously undermine retention efforts. Organizations should not focus on controlling dissonance but rather on leader situational awareness and ways to improve loyalty and commitment.

The general implication here is that most of the losses in the participant examples were somewhat preventable by leaders. This assertion emphasizes a broader implication that perhaps tremendous quantities of organizational resources are lost unnecessarily to turnover. Part of that consequence is ultimately the loss of competitive advantage as companies require the retention of its more highly skilled forces to remain competitive (Nissen, 2006; Schmitt et al., 2011).

While I would not assume that all organizations operate under negative conditions that cause turnover, my findings with my tenured participant group suggest that this could be quite common.

Proactive learning focus. Designing an evidence-based approach to addressing turnover requires the ability to diagnose the extent to which turnover is a problem and adapt an understanding of underlying retention principles to a particular organizational context (Allen et al., 2010). This of course requires ongoing diagnosis of the nature and causes of turnover and the development of organized retention initiatives. There are basically two primary types of retention strategies: systemic strategies which are based on general principles of retention management which are designed to reduce all turnover organization-wide, and targeted strategies which are designed to address specific types of turnover or from specific groups (Allen et al., 2010). The idea behind targeted retention strategies is that they can be tailored for specific types of employees such as executives or professionals like in this study that respond to different needs.

To develop a strategic, *evidenced-based* approach to retention, the organization's human resource (HR) department could employ a 3-part approach: (a) perform a turnover analysis, where the organization assesses turnover rates by department or individual, costs of the loss, and who is leaving the organization (position level); (b) assess the results from Step 1 in the context of your organization to benchmark your results versus other similar organizations, and (c) conduct a need assessment to understand if the turnover is still problematic based on the future strategic direction of the organization. The third part in the approach is crucial for an evidence-based approach because it involves collecting data about *why* people are leaving your organization. This calls for internal research via exit interviews, post exit surveys, focus groups, and so forth (Allen et al., 2010). With this data, organizational leaders might uncover that particular leaders

or departments have much higher turnover than others, or that a particular type of employee is leaving at a higher rate. If the departing employee was a valuable, senior-level contributor as in the examples from this study, a targeted intervention such as manager/leadership training could be deployed with the manager.

HR departments play a large role in the implementation, enforcement, and communication of strategic efforts. They would be the process owners of any organizational retention system such as this evidence-based approach. As such, the way to mitigate turnover rests not only with leaders and their overall awareness of their domains, but with HR processes to collect data and enforce optimal practices. One idea is to force leader *accountability* by making them routinely address the details of their employee losses to their superiors, estimate costs of the loss, and become a part of the organizational solution. This has the potential to drive greater ownership of the problem of turnover and make the organization better because it learns from its own data and people.

Existing theory development.

Effective Communication? In chapter 4, I detailed the findings on participants' attitudes and practices in communication with their subordinates and teams. Most all the participants seemed confident and sometimes prideful in their communication practices with subordinates, describing these efforts as routine and rigorous. The engagements usually took the form of regular one-on-one meetings, routinely engaging with employees by visits to their locations, or directly helping in duties or activities.

The impact of communication within an organization is well-established in the literature as it can have profound effects on motivation and retention. High levels of management communication have been shown to contribute to high perceived organizational support (POS),

which in turn can increase organizational citizenship behavior mentioned previously (Neves & Eisenberger, 2012). Both contribute to higher performance and engagement as employees feel valued and want to reciprocate that supportive sentiment through their behavior. These are positive factors that would theoretically reduce the inclination to leave the organization. Further, leader communication practices have been shown to be a major factor in establishing and building trust, which is also a well-established, major catalyst for commitment and loyalty to leaders and organizations (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002).

Further, as has been discussed, the premise of cognitive dissonance theory suggests that leaders would try to reduce the mental discomfort (dissonance) of conflicting thoughts by changing their understanding about negative conditions being experienced by their employees. (Festinger, 1962). In routine interactions with subordinates a manager may learn of negative sentiments, problems, conflicts, or reservations that an employee may be having. As with the experiences of all the participants, these would be the red flags or warning signs referred to in chapter 4 that would directly conflict with their beliefs of a stable, well-functioning department or team.

So, looking at high communication practices and cognitive dissonance combined, the proposed grounded theory suggests that the link between organizational communication, loyalty, and commitment could be limited significantly by the denial behaviors exhibited through cognitive dissonance. The results of this study imply that organizational leaders may need to reevaluate the effectiveness of communication practices given the findings in this context. This is because for all the best efforts at keeping their finger on the pulse of their teams, it may be in vain in certain organizations where cognitive dissonance is high among leaders.

Relationship of trust and turnover. The initial Trust phase of the emerging theory revolves mostly around how leaders manage their people because this is where the relationship is cultivated and grown. In this stage of the relationship, leaders and employees are learning about each other, and essential in this process are boundaries to establish trust and respect. Introduced briefly in chapter 2, organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) are the discretionary attitudinal behaviors from employees that strongly benefit the organization (Organ, 1988). In other words, organizational citizenship behaviors are those that are not required by the job (not part of a reward system) but employees do them anyway for internal reasons. Overall trust in organizations is noted as a major influence on OCB (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001) and, this could have more extensive implications in the context of this study because of the association OCB and turnover intentions. The literature states that low fairness and trust perceptions by employees equate to low OCB (Dirks & Ferrin), and, that low OCB within an organization equates to a much higher likelihood of turnover (Chen, Hui, & Sego, 1998). So, this establishes a theoretical Trust-OCB-Turnover link because trust influences OCB, and OCB influences turnover intentions.

The participants in this study exhibited high levels of trust with their subordinate professionals as detailed in chapter 4, yet still experienced 100% turnover of these professionals. Given the high levels of trust, one might have assumed from the existing literature that high levels of OCB would have been present in these dyadic relationships of my participants. The data from my emerging theory suggests a plausible challenge to this established relationship of trust, OCB, and turnover intention. This may also suggest that higher level employees react differently to trust in their attitudes and behaviors regarding turnover, indicating that perhaps skill level is a moderator to the trust-OCB relationship.

Implications for Future Research

Leadership style. Abundant research exists about leadership styles and the impact on management practices and retention, but it is mostly centered around the nursing profession. It could be beneficial to explore the turnover experiences of senior leaders based on different identified leadership styles. A review of six basic leadership styles—coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetter, and coaching (Goleman, 2000)—and their influence on organizational commitment could reveal that certain leaders are influencing the faulty cycle of the emerging theory. Or perhaps, some leader types do not have much experience with loss at all. This additional dimension to the emerging theory could be interesting in how it helps to explain the diversity of the reactions from different leaders to unplanned turnover.

Attitude. Another research opportunity exists related to understanding the predictability of leaders' attitudes on their behavior. This could provide further insight about why leaders—as the emerging theory suggests—fail to act to avert a likely separation. As suggested by the classic ABC model of attitudes (LaPiere, 1934) we understand that a person's attitude is composed of three components: affective (feelings), behavior (actions), and cognitions (beliefs). This model asserts that behaviors are not always consistent with attitudes, similar to how cognitive dissonance interferes with perceptions and actions in the proposed emerging theory. Other research on the influence of attitudes and predicting future behavior suggests that a number of factors are potentially in play (Ajzen, 2001; Glasman & Albarracín, 2006). Layering an attitude component into the emerging theory by obtaining additional data (attitude assessment) could add to our understanding of seemingly apathetic reactions to turnover events.

Strengths of the Study

One of the biggest strengths of this study relates to the richness of the data as it relates to the protocols of the constructivist epistemological paradigm. As such, shared experiences and

relationships with the participants allowed for strict attention and focus on the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014) as opposed to a more objectivist approach. Each participant was either an acquaintance or a former professional colleague. The reality we constructed was done together and not ignorant of mutual understandings of conditions that exist in large organizations. This helped me greatly to understand contextual references to events or roles within their respective companies. We could easily relate to the topic and to each other, and in some instances, had shared experiences that informed the study synergistically.

One of most important benefits of this study was the unique opportunity to learn from the experience of tenured professionals who in total represent about 200 years of collective leadership experience. As a scholar practitioner, I found myself feeling extremely lucky to be able to record the wisdom of experience of these leaders and share their insights in this study. Process notwithstanding, these interviews offered a in a rare perspective a topic that has essentially no literature history. I found the participants to be very candid and honest especially as the interview enticed them to reflect on negative, sometimes embarrassing experiences.

Conclusion

The nine senior leaders interviewed described experiences with unplanned loss of key professional employees. Their experiences followed similar patterns by way of a cycle of trust, shock, and then regret about the incident, all of which seemed to take place in the presence of high communication and red flags or warning signs. The emerging theory suggests that this cycle of events is at least supported by a number of theoretical influences that pertain to leader awareness and perception of the situation, their lack of understanding of the psychological and emotional needs of employees, and the lack of a broader retention system in their organizations. These factors combine to create a poor environment for retention and turnover mitigation, but

with added learning and formalized retention processes there is a huge opportunity to correct this cycle.

This study was made possible by the generous, candid recollections from the 9 senior leaders interviewed. Their generous willingness to volunteer for interviews and follow-up interviews allowed me to focus on the phenomenon and execute this study in an emergent, constructivist manner. This study hopefully accomplished a few important objectives: (a) illuminated the serious and pervasive problem of professional turnover that can have serious, negative implications for organizational performance; (b) helped the reader understand this phenomenon through the lens experienced of organizational leaders; and (c) provided a framework for *how* and *why* leaders may experience the sudden loss of professionals through the contribution of a new proposed theory

This study also adds a new dimension to our understanding about the role of leaders in unplanned turnover, from the context of experienced, senior-level organizational leaders of professional employees. It proposes challenges and support to existing literature by (a) drawing attention to the similarity of leaders' experiences with turnover of senior-level employees; (b) challenging our understanding about turnover intention and commitment in work environments where trust and autonomy are high, yet turnover still persists; (c) offering new insight for leaders to understand their perceived effectiveness of their communication practices with subordinates as high communication may be neither a predictor of employee commitment or leader awareness; (d) emphasizing the fact that leaders need to assess their environmental situation better as it relates to their employee's motivation and/or needs while proactively managing these relationships as part of a leader-directed retention approach; and (e) emphasizing the importance of formal assessment and accountability as part of a broader organizational retention system.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Participant Interview Questionnaire

First Group

1. Can you think of a time when you were surprised that a professional subordinate was leaving the organization? What was that experience like and how did you react to it?
2. What were the signs, if you were aware, that your employee was not happy or engaged?
3. Regarding the previous question, whenever a professional subordinate separated from the organization, how did that affect your perception of employee commitment and loyalty?
4. Can you give me a sense [or example] from your organization(s) of how you as a leader are aware of professional staff engagement and satisfaction? How is that communication facilitated if at all?
5. Related to the previous question, can you give me an example of a time when you were surprised to find that organizational morale was different than you expected?
Perhaps during a time of change?
6. Regarding your professional staff, how important are their unique skills and/or aptitudes to you as a leader?
7. Was there ever a subordinate employee that you felt was crucial to the running of the organization?
8. Do have a sense for what the off-boarding or 'exit process' might be failing to inform your organization?

Second Group

9. Could you elaborate on things you might consider "warning signs" of unhappiness or engagement of a professional employee?
 - a. How would you assess these signs?
 - b. What would you do differently?
10. How do regard or prioritize "autonomy" of professionals typically?
11. To what extent is professional courtesy practiced in your organization?
 - a. What is your understanding or perspective on the role of courtesy?
12. Does professional culture reduce how much we can realistically 'know' about each other (happiness, engagement, etc)?
13. Who is ultimately responsible or accountable when an employee leaves?

Third Group

Thinking about your example of the person you worked with (or employed directly) that decided to leave the organization abruptly, I have 2 short questions:

14. In your career, have you had several of these 'sudden' departure events of somebody you supervised?
15. If yes, where in the sequence did your example (from our big interview) fall?

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Approved Consent Form

Organizational Knowledge Preservation: Leader Perspectives, Attitudes And Awareness Of Voluntary Turnover Of Professional Employees Consent Form

Researcher: Jarrad Lee Hinojosa
 Committee Chair: Dr. Alfredo Ortiz-Aragon
 Institution: University of the Incarnate Word – Dreeben School of Education
 Email: jlhinojo@student.uiwtx.edu

You are invited to take part in a research study on leader experiences of voluntary turnover. Your participation is sought because of your extensive leadership experience.

What the study is about: This study seeks to explore the phenomenon of voluntary turnover from the perspective of administrative leaders who have experienced losing professional employees in their organization. The goal is to understand the awareness of separation factors that leaders may experience in their roles which may impact unplanned separation.

What you will be asked to do: If you agree to participate in this study, I will conduct an interview with you. This will include questions regarding your career experience with professional employees, your awareness of their engagement, and your perceptions of what caused their separation. The interview should take between 30 minutes and one hour to complete. With your permission, I would also like to audio-record the interview for transcription and data analysis purposes. You may be contacted for a brief follow-up interview should I need to collect additional information.

Risks and benefits: While not intentional, you may find some of the questions to be sensitive since we will be discussing your current or prior job and topics related to your experiences in those roles. This may also be a beneficial opportunity for personal discovery and reflection on voluntary turnover.

Taking part is voluntary: Participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to participate in the study, you may withdraw at any time. You may skip any questions that you may find uncomfortable or prefer not to answer. Participation in this study does not mean that you are forfeiting any of your legal rights.

Your answers will be confidential: Confidentiality of participants is of the highest priority. Anonymity of participants is offered in the form of pseudonyms and/or numerical identification. Data recordings and transcripts will be password protected on a personal computer and audio equipment. Third party transcription services will be utilized, and non-disclosure agreement letters will be requested for all transcribed interviews. Per standard data retention protocol, all data will be securely retained for 3 years upon completion of the study, after which all data will be destroyed.

If you have questions, please ask them at any time. If you have additional questions later or you wish to report a problem that may be related to this study, contact:

Jarrad Lee Hinojosa

Alfredo Ortiz-Aragon, Ph.D.

To contact the University of the Incarnate Word committee that reviews and approves research with human subjects, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and ask any questions about your rights as a research participant, call: UIW IRB, Office of Research Development (210) 805-3036.

University of the Incarnate Word IRB Approved Application #: <u>17-09-007</u> Date Approved: <u>9/18/17</u>
--

I understand the expectations and rights of participants in this study. All my questions regarding the study have been addressed, and I am willing to voluntarily participate. My signature certifies this statement and the fact that I am 18 years of age.

Participant's Signature

Date

University of the Incarnate Word
IRB Approved
Application #: 17-09-007
Date Approved: 9/18/17

Appendix C

Transcription Service Nondisclosure Agreement

CLIENT NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT

This CLIENT NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT, effective as of the date last set forth below (this "Agreement"), between the undersigned actual or potential client ("Client") and **Rev.com, Inc.** ("Rev.com") is made to confirm the understanding and agreement of the parties hereto with respect to certain proprietary information being provided to Rev.com for the purpose of performing translation, transcription and other document related services (the "Rev.com Services"). In consideration for the mutual agreements contained herein and the other provisions of this Agreement, the parties hereto agree as follows:

1. Scope of Confidential Information

1.1. "Confidential Information" means, subject to the exceptions set forth in Section 1.2 hereof, any documents, video files or other related media or text supplied by Client to Rev.com for the purpose of performing the Rev.com Services.

1.2. Confidential Information does not include information that: (i) was available to Rev.com prior to disclosure of such information by Client and free of any confidentiality obligation in favor of Client known to Rev.com at the time of disclosure; (ii) is made available to Rev.com from a third party not known by Rev.com at the time of such availability to be subject to a confidentiality obligation in favor of Client; (iii) is made available to third parties by Client without restriction on the disclosure of such information; (iv) is or becomes available to the public other than as a result of disclosure by Rev.com prohibited by this Agreement; or (v) is developed independently by Rev.com or Rev.com's directors, officers, members, partners, employees, consultants, contractors, agents, representatives or affiliated entities (collectively, "Associated Persons").

2. Use and Disclosure of Confidential Information

2.1. Rev.com will keep secret and will not disclose to anyone any of the Confidential Information, other than furnishing the Confidential Information to Associated Persons; provided that such Associated Persons are bound by agreements respecting confidential information. Rev.com will not use any of the Confidential Information for any purpose other than performing the Rev.com Services on Client's behalf. Rev.com will use reasonable care and adequate measures to protect the security of the Confidential Information and to attempt to prevent any Confidential Information from being disclosed or otherwise made available to unauthorized persons or used in violation of the foregoing.

2.2. Notwithstanding anything to the contrary herein, Rev.com is free to make, and this Agreement does not restrict, disclosure of any Confidential Information in a judicial, legislative or administrative investigation or proceeding or to a government or other regulatory agency; provided that, if permitted by law, Rev.com provides to Client prior notice of the

intended disclosure and permits Client to intervene therein to protect its interests in the Confidential Information, and cooperate and assist Client in seeking to obtain such protection.

3. Certain Rights and Limitations

3.1. All Confidential Information will remain the property of Client.

3.2. This Agreement imposes no obligations on either party to purchase, sell, license, transfer or otherwise transact in any products, services or technology.

4. Termination

4.1. Upon Client's written request, Rev.com agrees to use good faith efforts to return promptly to Client any Confidential Information that is in writing and in the possession of Rev.com and to certify the return or destruction of all Confidential Information; provided that Rev.com may retain a summary description of Confidential Information for archival purposes.

4.2. The rights and obligations of the parties hereto contained in Sections 2 (Use and Disclosure of Confidential Information) (subject to Section 2.1), 3 (Certain Rights and Limitations), 4 (Termination), and 5 (Miscellaneous) will survive the return of any tangible embodiments of Confidential Information and any termination of this Agreement.

5. Miscellaneous

5.1. Client and Rev.com are independent contractors and will so represent themselves in all regards. Nothing in this Agreement will be construed to make either party the agent or legal representative of the other or to make the parties partners or joint venturers, and neither party may bind the other in any way. This Agreement will be governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of the State of California governing such agreements, without regard to conflicts-of-law principles. The sole and exclusive jurisdiction and venue for any litigation arising out of this Agreement shall be an appropriate federal or state court located in the State of California, and the parties agree not to raise, and waive, any objections or defenses based upon venue or forum non

conveniens. This Agreement (together with any agreement for the Rev.com Services) contains the complete and exclusive agreement of the parties with respect to the subject matter hereof and supersedes all prior agreements and understandings with respect thereto, whether written or oral, express or implied. If any provision of this Agreement is held invalid, illegal or unenforceable by a court of competent jurisdiction, such will not affect any other provision of this Agreement, which will remain in full force and effect. No amendment or alteration of the terms of this

Agreement will be effective unless made in writing and executed by both parties hereto. A failure or delay in exercising any right in respect to this Agreement will not be presumed to operate as a waiver, and a single or partial exercise of any right will not be presumed to preclude any subsequent or further exercise of that right or the exercise of any other right. Any modification or waiver of any provision of this Agreement will not be effective unless made in writing. Any such waiver will be effective only in the specific instance and for the purpose given.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties have caused this Agreement to be executed below by their duly authorized signatories.

CLIENT

Print Name: _____

By: _____

Name:

Title:

Date:

Address for notices to Client:

REV.COM, INC.

By: _____

Name: Cheryl Brown

Title: Account Manager

Date: June 4, 2018

Address for notices to Rev.com, Inc.:

222 Kearny St.
STE 800
San Francisco, CA 94108

Appendix D

Introductory Solicitation Email to Participants

Dear potential participant,

Thanks for taking the time to do this interview. Shouldn't take long as I've revised the questionnaire a few times. Attached is the required consent form. Whenever you get a chance, please sign and return it to me as it's a requirement that I need from every participant.

What's my topic?

This is research on organizational leaders and their perceptions & experiences with voluntary, early separation of highly-skilled employees (unplanned turnover).

Basically, I'm looking for the perspective and reflections of people like you who have lead in an organization, who've had 'professional' subordinates under them, and who have experienced unforeseen turnover of these skilled workers. This is not the same as job 'abandonment' but rather somebody who was valuable to the organization suddenly deciding to leave the company.

Even if you haven't experienced this directly, you may have been aware of this turnover activity happening in your organization. Your perceptions and reflections on these types of events are the critical piece of the research.

Starter interview questions to think about:

Can you think of a time when you were surprised that a professional subordinate was leaving the organization? What was that experience like and how did you react to it?

1. What were the signs, if you were aware, that your employee was not happy or engaged?

The rest will be more questions like these.

Note: My research design is called Constructivist Grounded Theory which is basically an 'emergent' technique for gathering data, usually from interviews. What this means is that you should feel free to make suggestions or 'wander' a bit as you recall an event without worrying that you are 'getting off track.' These segues can become key follow up items for me to pursue, and maybe even have to follow up with you later for more clarification.

We want to stay 'on topic' but without you feeling bounded by the exact words in the question.

I will call you at noon tomorrow, Saturday the Xth.
Really looking forward to speaking with you!

Jarrad Hinojosa



Appendix E

Structured Abstract (Accompanied Defense Announcement)

1

A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF SENIOR LEADER EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF UNPLANNED TURNOVER

Jarrad Lee Hinojosa

University of the Incarnate Word, 2019

Research Focus. This study focused on the persistent problem facing organizational leaders of voluntary turnover of professional staffs. The problem of turnover in general has been studied for decades from the perspective of those who left the organization. What is lacking in the body of research is an understanding, from the perspective of senior management, of why professionals abruptly leave the organization (Waldman, Carter, & Hom, 2015). The loss of higher-skilled employees has high costs related to recruitment and training, as well as implications for organizational knowledge gaps and morale deterioration among other factors (Allen, Bryant, & Vardaman, 2010; Cascio, 2006; Guidice, Heames, & Wang, 2009). By exploring the experiences and perceptions of senior leaders who have dealt with losing skilled professionals, leaders and organizations can increase their understanding of potential contributing factors that lead to costly turnover. Senior leaders need to better understand possible disparities between their presumed intent of having an engaged, committed, and productive staff and the reality of the conditions that lead to unplanned separation.

Research Methods. This research focused on gathering unique viewpoints of experienced leaders in a format that was best suited for collection of human perspectives about shared experiences as leaders. This was accomplished by an explanatory, qualitative method that drew from a grounded theory approach. A more contemporary, less objective evolution of traditional grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory was utilized which still retains the emergent, iterative process of traditional grounded theory, but instead allows for and promotes the inclusion of the researcher's point of view (Charmaz, 2014). Senior-level, tenured leaders from a variety of industry backgrounds were selected for interviews. These leaders had to have experienced the sudden, unplanned departure of a professional subordinate. These experiences were captured with personal, one-on-one interviews, transcribed, then coded and analyzed in methods consistent with the constructivist grounded theory approach. Based on response data collected in the interviews, theoretical sampling was employed to pursue and refine categories for theoretical development.

Research Results/Findings. The proposed grounded theory that emerged from the responses of leader participants is described as a repeating cycle of leader experiences associated with the unplanned loss of a valuable employee. This cycle of leader experience (sequence) is composed of major phases of Trust, Shock, and Regret. Simultaneous to the Trust-Shock-Regret cycle are situational conditions related to the unplanned loss: high leader communication, 'warning signs',

and management disconnect. Several important theoretical concepts related to motivation and leadership from existing literature are also introduced to help explain what may be happening with leaders in their experiences with loss.

Conclusions from Research. This study adds a new dimension to our understanding about the role of leaders in unplanned turnover, from the context of experienced, senior-level organizational leaders of professional employees. It proposes challenges and support to existing literature by (a) drawing attention to the similarity of leaders' experiences with turnover of senior-level employees; (b) challenging our understanding about turnover intention and commitment in work environments where trust and autonomy are high, yet turnover still persists; (c) offering new insight for leaders to understand the effectiveness of their communication practices with subordinates as high communication may not be a predictor of commitment or a contributor to leader awareness; (d) emphasizing the fact that leaders need to assess their environmental situation better as it relates to their employee's motivation and/or needs while proactively managing these relationships as part of a strategic retention approach; and (e) emphasizing the importance of formal assessment and accountability as part of an organizational retention system.