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An Examination of Conflict Resolution in Dispersed Organizations Using Strengths-Based Leadership

Tracie Shutt

tlp06e@acu.edu

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Nannette W. Glenn, Ph.D.

Dr. Nannette Glenn, Dean of
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Professional Studies

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Dissertation Committee:

Donna Smith, PhD

Dr. Donna Smith, Chair

Colleen P Ramos. PhD.

Dr. Colleen Ramos

Jose Perez

Dr. Joe Perez

Abilene Christian University

School of Education Leadership

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Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Tracie Leigh Shutt

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Dedication

For my husband, Vincent, for helping me every step of the way. And, for my son, Hayden, for always keeping me humble.

Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to try to gain a deeper understanding of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach, implemented through a strengths identification and development program, on the team member trust, affective conflict, and employee engagement within a dispersed organization. The participants in the study all worked in a dispersed organization and participated in a strengths identification development program, centered around the StrengthsFinder 2.0 self-assessment. After completing the assessment, the participants in the study participated in a group strength coaching session with a certified strengths coach, where they were coached on their individual strength areas, as well as the team dynamics. This case study used one-on-one interviews to gain understanding, from the team members' perspective, the impact of the strengths identification and development program on the shared leadership, trust, conflict, and employee engagement within the group. The overall findings indicated that the strengths identification and development program had a positive impact on the shared leadership within the group. The program did not have an impact on the employee development, the level of trust, or the level of conflict within the group. However, the participants did feel that the conflict that arose within the group was handled more effectively. The findings indicated that while strength identification and development programs can improve shared leadership and conflict resolution within a dispersed organization, continued development support and coaching may be necessary to provide significant improvement in other areas, such as employee engagement and trust.

Keywords: shared leadership, strengths, trust, conflict resolution, employee engagement, dispersed organizations

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction

Modern life is becoming increasingly more virtual, with the ability to socialize, shop, and even visit a doctor online. Although this virtual world offers many conveniences, society is beginning to recognize the potential dangers of our new virtual reality, ranging from cyberbullying (Chan et al., 2019) to the possibility of increased depression (Maras et al., 2015; Yoon et al., 2019). This increased virtuality does not come without risks to organizations as well.

Background of the Study

Dispersed organizations are becoming more and more popular (Hoch & Dulebohn, 2017; Nordback & Espinosa, 2019), and this trend is expected to continue (Goldstein, 2019; Uzialko, 2018). The dispersed organizational structure offers many advantages, including the ability to reach a larger customer base, a larger talent pool for employers, increased flexibility for both employers and employees, as well as access to unique knowledge (Hoegl & Muethel, 2016; Lilian, 2014; Madlock, 2012). However, along with these advantages come certain distinct challenges (Nordback & Espinosa, 2019), including decreased trust and increased conflict amongst team members (Haines, 2014; Hoch & Dulebohn, 2017; Nordback & Espinosa, 2019), which can result in decreased employee engagement (Ford et al., 2017; Haines, 2014).

Researchers have shown that there are various leadership approaches that can effectively address conflict within traditional organizations, including both developmental and strengths-based approaches. However, there is a significant amount of debate in the literature regarding which end of this leadership continuum is most effective (Harzer & Ruch, 2014; Kegan & Lahey, 2016; MacKie, 2016; Rath, 2008; Stanley, 2003). While each leadership approach has its merits, a strengths-based leadership approach will be the focus of this study. The literature provides a foundational understanding of dispersed organizations and strengths-based leadership

separately. However, dispersed organizations face unique challenges (Allen & Ofahengaue Vakalahi, 2013; Ford et al., 2017; Peñarroja et al., 2015) affecting trust, decision-making, managing conflict, and expressing opinions within these organizations (Hoch & Dulebohn, 2017) that must be considered when contemplating a strengths-based approach.

Conflict within dispersed organizations is often caused by ambiguity surrounding the tasks, roles, and responsibilities within the team, as well as a lack of team cohesiveness (Shin, 2005). Hoch and Dulebohn (2017) posited that a shared leadership approach is beneficial for dispersed organizations. The traditional view of leadership often focuses on a vertical leadership structure, where leadership is entrusted to one primary leader of a team or organization who is charged with decision making and oversight of the organization and its activities (Wassenaar & Pearce, 2016). Although this leadership approach can be effective in traditional organizations, it may be less effective for dispersed organizations due to the decreased contact between team members and their leaders. One contrasting leadership theory to this "heroic" leadership approach is shared leadership. Shared leadership involves team members sharing influence amongst each other, with team members stepping forward to lead when the situation warrants and stepping back to allow others to lead when the needs of the organization shift (Northouse, 2015). Researchers have found that this leadership approach offers various benefits to dispersed organizations as it is linked to collaborative decision-making, increased trust and knowledge sharing among team members, as well as positive team outcomes, including improved performance (Hoch & Dulebohn, 2017). Additionally, shared leadership has been found to increase team members' level of engagement and commitment to the team, often resulting in improved team performance (Chiu et al., 2016).

However, in order for shared leadership in dispersed teams to be effective, team members must perceive each other as legitimate leaders (Nordback & Espinosa, 2019) and recognize each other's competencies (Chiu et al., 2016). There are various ways that team members can establish themselves as legitimate leaders, including through strengths identification and development (Welch et al., 2014). However, there is a need for a deeper understanding of virtual organizations, including the benefits of shared leadership and strengths identification and development for these teams. In this study, I focused on narrowing this gap in the leadership literature by exploring employee perceptions of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the employee engagement, team member trust, and affective conflict within a dispersed organization.

Statement of the Problem

Currently there is a lack of insight in the leadership literature regarding the changing demands on leaders due to the shift from traditional face-to-face organizations to virtual and dispersed teams. This lack of understanding and increased disconnection between team members of virtual teams has led to decreased trust and increased conflict within these organizations (Hoch & Dulebohn, 2017). MacKie (2014) found that the identification and development of strength areas has led to improved leadership in a traditional organizational setting. Increasing knowledge of how leaders can effectively increase trust and decrease conflict that occurs in virtual and dispersed teams using shared leadership, implemented through the development and alignment of team member strengths with team member roles, could result in more effective leadership of virtual and dispersed organizations, as well as improved employee engagement. There are numerous compelling reasons this problem should be studied, including the increased

prevalence of virtual and dispersed teams and the lack of leader preparedness for this shift from traditional to virtual and dispersed teams.

Increased Prevalence of Virtual or Dispersed Organizations

Many organizations are trending towards more virtual or dispersed options due to the flexibility that this structure offers both organizations and their employees (Allen & Ofahengaue Vakalahi, 2013; Ford et al., 2017; Lilian, 2014; Madlock, 2012; Peñarroja et al., 2015). Traditional organizations are restricted to the available onsite human resources, which in some cases may be limited. In contrast, the use of virtual and dispersed teams has allowed organizations to take advantage of the talent and skills of individuals throughout the world. Lilian (2014) emphasized that virtual teams have the ability to take advantage of the best talents due to the fact that these virtual teams are no longer restricted by their physical location. However, although the dispersed organizational structure offers many advantages and continues to increase in prevalence, many organizations must now determine how to manage the unique conflict and trust issues that surface within these organizations, as well as the resulting impact on employee engagement.

Lack of Leader Preparedness

Researchers have emphasized that although there is a significant body of knowledge available regarding the leadership and management of traditional teams and organizations, additional research is needed regarding the leadership and management of virtual and dispersed teams (Ford et al., 2017; Lilian, 2014; Madlock, 2012). Hoegl and Muethel (2016) noted that little attention has been devoted to leadership in virtual teams, despite the increased prevalence of these teams and the need for leaders to rethink their understanding of leadership. Similarly, Ford et al. (2017) indicated that although virtual and dispersed teams have existed for some time

now, as the prevalence of this organizational structure increases it is important for leaders to be trained in the effective management of these types of teams. Specifically, leaders of traditional, face-to-face organizations are afforded certain insight and control over the daily activities of their employees, whereas leaders of dispersed organization have a decreased ability to directly influence the activities of employees (Nordback & Espinosa, 2019). Additionally, team members of dispersed organizations may have different expectations of leadership than members of face-to-face organizations, adding additional strain to the effectiveness of the traditional leadership approach within these organizations. Unfortunately, although leaders may have a deep understanding of leadership in traditional organizations, these leaders may be surprisingly underprepared for their changing role in virtual and dispersed organizations and teams. Nordback and Espinosa (2019) posited that shared leadership may be a more effective leadership approach within dispersed organizations than vertical leadership, or the single leader approach, due to the contrasting demands and expectations within dispersed organizations. However, in order for shared leadership to be effective within any organization, the leadership effort needs to be effectively coordinated.

This increase in the prevalence of virtual and dispersed teams, as well as the lack of leader preparedness in this area has led to a need for additional research of virtual and dispersed teams (Lilian, 2014; Madlock, 2012; Peñarroja et al., 2015). Additionally, there has been a call for research in areas that could offer insight into the leadership of virtual and dispersed teams, including a deeper understanding of how leaders can manage and resolve conflicts that arise within their teams (Dimas & Lourenço, 2015; Humphrey et al., 2017; O'Neill & Allen, 2014; Xie & Luan, 2014) and the solutions that strengths-based leadership may offer (Aime et al., 2014; Harzer & Ruch, 2014; Hoch & Dulebohn, 2017; Oore et al., 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative embedded single case study was to explore employee perceptions of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach, implemented through identifying strengths, on employee engagement, team member trust, and affective conflict within a dispersed organization. The results of this case study will provide valuable insight to leaders of dispersed organizations who are considering implementing development programs within their organizations, including the benefits of a strength-based program and pitfalls that may be avoided.

Research Questions

Specifically, in this study I explored the following questions:

RQ1. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact and effectiveness of a strength identification and development program on developing the shared leadership within their organization?

RQ2. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the employee engagement within their organization?

RQ3. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the trust within their organization?

RQ4. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the conflict within their organization?

Definitions of Key Terms

Affective conflict. Affective conflict, also referred to as relationship conflict, occurs when individuals within an organization disagree about personal issues, rather than task related issues (Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

Dispersed organization. Dispersed organizations consist of individuals collaborating across geographically distributed locations (Klitmoller & Lauring, 2013), resulting in decreased face-to-face interaction and increased reliance upon virtual modes of communication (Allen & Ofahengaue Vakalahi, 2013), such as phone calls, e-mails, and other ways.

Employee engagement. Employee engagement is an emotional state in which employees feel passionate and invested in their work (Maylett & Warner, 2014).

Strengths. Strengths are natural capacities that enable an individual to consistently perform at their personal best (Kong & Ho, 2016; Rath, 2007; Roche & Hefferon, 2013; Seligman, 2002; Wood et al., 2011).

Task conflict. Task conflict occurs when individuals within an organization disagree about the work the group is doing (Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the benefits and potential downsides of the increasing virtuality and dispersed nature of organizations. Specifically, in this chapter, I focused on the lack of leader preparedness and understanding of the unique issues facing these virtual and dispersed organizations, as well as the potential solutions that shared leadership and a strengths-based leadership approach may provide. In the next chapter, I will provide a deeper discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of this study and the literature surrounding virtual and dispersed organizations and strength-based leadership. Additionally, in the next chapter, I will introduce

the literature surrounding conflict resolution, which plays a crucial role in the success of both

face-to-face and dispersed organizations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Organizations are continuing to move towards more dispersed and virtual organizational structures, often without considering the change in leadership demands this dispersed structure may bring. In this study, I considered employee perceptions of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach, implemented through the development and alignment of team member strengths with team member roles, on the employee engagement, trust, and affective conflict within a dispersed organization. In this chapter, I will introduce the theoretical framework underlying this study, which includes a discussion of self-determination theory and shared leadership. Then, the current literature surrounding positive psychology and strength-based leadership, virtual and dispersed organizations, conflict resolution, and employee engagement will be reviewed.

Theoretical Framework

Strengths-based leadership is grounded in various theories. These theories include self-determination theory and shared leadership. In this section, I will introduce these theories, as well as discuss the current gaps in the literature surrounding self-determination theory and shared leadership in virtual and dispersed work environments, some of which will be addressed through this study.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory is a motivation theory, introduced by Deci and Ryan in 1985, that can be applied within organizations, as well as many other areas of life (Deci et al., 2017). Deci and Ryan posited that an individual's well-being is dependent upon the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs, which include a need for autonomy, competency, and connectedness (Deci et al., 2017; Spence & Oades, 2011). Further, Deci et al. (2017) suggested that in a work

environment, employees' motivation and performance are impacted by the satisfaction of these three basic needs.

Basic Tenets of the Self-Determination Theory

Underlying self-determination theory is the idea that individuals are growth oriented and are seeking to satisfy a need for a sense of self and connection with one another (Deci & Ryan, 2000). With this in mind, Deci and Ryan proposed a model which theorizes that the impact of environmental factors on employee motivations and experiences is mediated by the satisfaction of the employee's need for autonomy, competency, and connectedness (Deci et al., 2017).

Three Basic Needs. Although self-determination theory emphasizes that all three needs – autonomy, competency, and connectedness – must be met to foster healthy development, the satisfaction of autonomy is considered the primary need (Spence & Oades, 2011). Ryan and Deci (2017) described autonomy, as it relates to self-determination theory, as an individual's need to self-regulate their experiences and actions. In other words, actions are autonomous when the individual is genuinely interested in the activity and takes responsibility for their actions. Competency is described as an individual's need to feel mastery (Ryan & Deci, 2017). An individual's feeling of competency can decrease in certain contexts, such as in situations involving challenges that are too difficult, after receiving persistent negative external feedback, or even in situations involving pervasive negative self-talk and negative self-comparison to others (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Lastly, connectedness, also referred to as relatedness, can be described as an individual's feeling of belonging and significance within a social group (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Importantly, researchers have found that these three needs are universal (Gagne & Deci, 2005) and innate (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This is a significant point as critics of self-determination

theory have argued its focus on autonomy is only relevant in western, individualistic cultures (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In response to this criticism, Ryan and Deci (2017) emphasized that although autonomy in the traditional sense, meaning independence or self-sufficiency, is often not relevant outside of western cultures, autonomy as it is defined relative to self-determination theory, meaning an individual's genuine interest in their work, is universal.

Motivation. Another important aspect of self-determination theory is motivation. Self-determination theory emphasizes that it is not just the level of motivation that is important, but also the orientation of motivation, meaning the different reasons that lead to specific actions (Deci & Ryan, 2000). There are two general types of motivation within the self-determination theory motivational model – autonomous and controlled motivation (Deci et al., 2017). Deci et al. (2017) proposed that individuals who feel ownership of their work and are provided support become more autonomous, and in turn, increase their performance and well-being. This concept is referred to as autonomous motivation. In contrast, when employees experience situations involving contingent rewards or difficult power dynamics, this can result in decreased performance and well-being. This concept is referred to as controlled motivation. Therefore, according to self-determination theory, the more autonomous motivation is, the better employee performance and well-being will be (Deci et al., 2017).

Intrinsic motivation is a type of autonomous motivation which is used to describe activities that are inherently interesting or motivating (Deci et al., 2017; Deci & Ryan, 2000), meaning individuals freely engage in activities out of interest rather than out of need satisfaction or requirement (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In an organizational setting, this type of motivation can be increased by providing employees choices, as well as acknowledging their personal experiences (Deci & Ryan, 2000), essentially satisfying employees' need for autonomy, connectedness, and

competence. Strengths-based leadership may provide a means to address these needs. By identifying and recognizing employee strengths, employers are encouraging the employee's need for competence. Additionally, by developing and focusing on strength areas, the employee's need for autonomy is supported. As these needs are satisfied, inherent motivation increases, resulting in positive outcomes, including improved employee attitudes and behaviors (Kong & Ho, 2016). This understanding of intrinsic motivation is a cornerstone of this study and creates a case for further exploring employee perceptions of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach, implemented through identifying strengths, on the employee engagement, trust, and affective conflict within an organization.

Intrinsic motivation can be viewed in contrast to extrinsic motivation, where individuals are driven by external factors, such as praise or rewards (Gagne & Deci, 2005), as well as negative motivational factors, such as threats or deadlines (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Extrinsic motivation results in individuals acting to achieve a specific result, rather than acting a certain way out of desire (Gagne & Deci, 2005). Deci et al. (2017) posited that although controlled motivation can have short-term benefits, there is a long-term negative impact on performance and work engagement, as well as decreased intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, even though researchers have emphasized the dangers of extrinsic motivation, it is important to understand that intrinsic motivation only occurs when an individual is interested in the activity (Deci & Ryan, 2000), meaning there are instances in which extrinsic motivation is necessary. In an ideal world, every aspect of an employee's job would be intrinsically motivating. However, this is not always the case. Therefore, it is essential to understand external motivation and how it can be effectively utilized. Deci and Ryan (2000) suggested that one explanation for individuals being willing to complete tasks that are not inherently interesting, and therefore must be

externally motivated, may be an individual's connection to those who value the task. In other words, an individual's sense of, or desire for, connectedness may drive them to complete activities they are not intrinsically motivated to do.

Self-Determination Theory and Strengths

The effectiveness of strengths-use in an organizational setting can be examined using self-determination theory. Kong and Ho (2016) described the relationship between self-determination theory and strengths use – self-determination theory explains why people work, whereas strengths use explains how people work. As discussed, self-determination theory suggests that employees desire three basic needs to be met – autonomy, connectedness, and competence. Organizations that facilitate the identification and development of strengths attempt to satisfy each of these needs. MacKie (2016) explained that by emphasizing an employee's talent areas and providing a supportive and empowering environment to develop these strength areas, strength-based organizations satisfy an employee's need for autonomy and competence. Additionally, strength-based organizations support the employee's need for connectedness by providing insight into the context of the employee's strengths, meaning employees are provided an understanding of how their individual strengths align with the strategic goals of the organization (MacKie, 2016). By focusing on strengths identification and development, organizations satisfy the three basic needs identified by self-determination theory, resulting in increased intrinsic motivation and improved self-confidence (Kong & Ho, 2016).

Limitations of the Literature

The literature surrounding self-determination theory indicates that this theory can be effective in improving many different aspects of organizations, including employee and employer relationships, compensation strategies, employee reviews, and even organizational

design (Ryan & Deci, 2017). However, there has not been a significant amount of empirical research completed surrounding the effectiveness of a strengths-based leadership approach analyzed through the lens of self-determination theory. Researchers have posited that strengths identification and development could provide an avenue to provide autonomy support and need satisfaction to employees within dispersed organizations. However, currently, there is not significant empirical research to support this idea. Lastly, Ryan and Deci (2017) acknowledged that self-determination theory applies in a virtual setting, and researchers have begun to examine self-determination theory in dispersed organizations. However, there is not a significant amount of research acknowledging the unique challenges faced by virtual and dispersed organizations, and how the traditional approach to autonomy support and need satisfaction can be modified for these organizations. In this study, I explored employee perceptions of the impact strengths identification and development has on dispersed organization, through the lens of self-determination theory.

Shared Leadership

Shared leadership is a group level theory. According to shared leadership theory, team members should share influence and responsibility amongst each other, rather than solely rely upon their formal leader to fulfill leadership responsibilities (Chiu et al., 2016). As organizations become more complex, the leadership skills and knowledge necessary to effectively lead organizations become broader and it becomes increasingly difficult for one leader to possess the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively lead the organization (De Cruz, 2019). Additionally, as organizations become more dispersed, the traditional leadership approach, which focuses on one primary leader, becomes less effective (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). Shared leadership functions through team members' interpersonal relationships (Chiu et al., 2016).

Team members work together to claim leadership responsibility when the task fits their area of expertise, while allowing others to claim leadership responsibility as the demands on the team shift (Chiu et al., 2016; Northouse, 2015). However, in order for this leadership approach to function effectively, teams must have team members with the right knowledge and capability (Chiu et al., 2016). In this section, I will introduce the basic tenets of shared leadership theory, the benefits and potential drawbacks of shared leadership, as well as the current limitations of the literature on shared leadership.

Basic Tenets of the Shared Leadership Theory

Currently, it is difficult to define the basic tenets of shared leadership theory as there is disagreement in the literature surrounding the theoretical framework of shared leadership (Zhu et al., 2018). However, Zhu et al. (2018) described common ideas amongst the various definitions of shared leadership, which include that shared leadership is about influence among peers, and the idea that leadership roles are dispersed amongst team members.

In a traditional organizational structure, team members primarily rely upon titles and authority to determine who their leader is, rather than the unique abilities and knowledge of the individuals within the organization. Additionally, leadership is generally centralized to one or a few members of the organization. However, as organizations become more complex, organizations are now moving towards "knowledge workers" – employees who often know more about a topic than their formally designated leaders (Marquardt, 2011). This transition has made it crucial for organizations to provide a sustainable structure for their knowledge workers to apply their unique skill set, rather than simply support a traditional leader figure (De Cruz, 2019; Marquardt, 2011). Shared leadership offers structure for these employees as the leadership role is determined by the individual's ability to influence their peers through their unique knowledge

and skill set rather than a centralized figure of authority (De Cruz, 2019). Under the shared

leadership approach, leadership responsibilities are dispersed amongst team members based upon

the fit between the employees' skill set and the current demands on the organization.

Additionally, shared leadership is dynamic in nature, increasing and decreasing due to the

environmental and task demands on the team (Drescher et al., 2014).

Benefits of Shared Leadership

The nature of the work expected of today's organizations has placed new demands on

organizations and requires employees who are fully engaged and proactive (Northouse, 2015;

Ryan & Deci, 2017). Researchers have found that a shared leadership approach may be a way to

address the changing needs within organizations. Additionally, this leadership approach has been

shown to offer numerous potential benefits to teams and organizations, including improved trust

among team members and improved effectiveness (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). However, there

are some potential drawbacks to shared leadership, which must be considered as well.

Trust. Trust has been found to play a dynamic role in shared leadership (Drescher et al.,

2014). Specifically, in order for teams to implement a shared leadership approach, there must be

a level of trust among team members. However, researchers have also found that as teams

effectively distribute leadership functions amongst each other, trust increases (Drescher et al.,

2014). In other words, trust is needed to implement a shared leadership approach, and continues

to increase as the team successfully shares leadership functions with one another.

De Cruz (2019) posited that in a shared leadership approach, trust develops between team

members through positive social exchanges, where team members influence and are influenced

by one another. Further, shared leadership has also been found to strengthen social inclusion

among team members, leading to increased team cohesiveness (Chiu et al., 2016). Self-

determination theory would describe this phenomenon as connectedness. However, in addition to positive social exchanges, team members must understand each other's unique capabilities (Drescher et al., 2014) and develop a level of trust in their teammates in order to respect and not feel threatened by the power shifts that occur within the team (Aime et al., 2014). There are numerous approaches that can be used to establish team members' capabilities, including strengths identification and development.

Effectiveness. Researchers have found that shared leadership is especially effective in managing tasks or projects that are complex and technical in nature (Muethel et al., 2012), and has been found to improve a team's response time for even the most complex issues (Northouse, 2015). Shared leadership has been shown to enhance team effectiveness and creativity through utilizing the unique knowledge and skill set of team members (Aime et al., 2014; Chiu et al., 2016). Further, Aime et al. (2014) explained that shared leadership has a unique power dynamic which allows the power in the team or organization to shift among team members as the needs of the group change. Specifically, power shifts to the individual who possess the necessary resources and skills to effectively manage the problem at hand (Aime et al., 2014). However, Chiu et al. (2016) pointed out that this idea is dependent upon teams consisting of the right team members with the right competencies, which has not been thoroughly tested. In this study, I narrowed this gap in the literature by exploring employee perceptions of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach, implemented through identifying strengths, on employee engagement, team member trust, and affective conflict within a dispersed organization.

Researchers have also posited that shared leadership is especially important in virtual and dispersed teams and could significantly improve the effectiveness of these teams (Muethel et al., 2012; Nordback & Espinosa, 2019; Northouse, 2015). One reason shared leadership may be

effective for virtual and dispersed teams is due to the complex social nature of these teams. Muethel et al. (2012) explained that the traditional form of leadership, which focuses on one primary leader, is difficult to sustain in dispersed organizations due to the limited direct interactions between team members. However, there has not been a significant amount of empirical testing around the effectiveness of shared leadership in dispersed teams.

Drawbacks. Although a shared leadership approach offers many potential benefits to organizations, there are potential drawbacks that must also be considered. First, as noted, teams must consist of team members with the right competencies and knowledge in order to share leadership effectively (Chiu et al., 2016). Further, in order for teams to ensure they have the right team members, they must be able to identify the unique knowledge and skill set that each team member brings to the group.

Secondly, although shared leadership has been shown to improve effectiveness in dispersed teams, this leadership approach may pose significant drawbacks to these teams if it is not effectively coordinated (Nordback & Espinosa, 2019). Nordback and Espinosa (2019) emphasized that team members must have a familiarity of their team members that allows them to anticipate each other's actions and effectively share the leadership responsibilities. Otherwise, the disjointed leadership of these dispersed organizations may destroy the effectiveness of the organizations (Nordback & Espinosa, 2019). Relatedly, team members must see the shifts of power that occur through shared leadership as legitimate (Aime et al., 2014). In other words, team members must be able to understand each other's strengths and skill sets enough to view the shift of power amongst team members as appropriate and legitimate. If this legitimacy is not apparent, team member's leadership will be viewed as inappropriate, negatively affecting the productivity of the team (Aime et al., 2014).

Limitations of the Literature

The theoretical basis for shared leadership and the possibility of improved trust and effectiveness in organizations that utilize this leadership approach is established in the literature. However, there has not been a significant amount of empirical testing done to establish the legitimacy of this theory and its potential benefits. Additionally, researchers have emphasized that in order for shared leadership to be effective, team members must perceive each other and the power shifts that occur within organizations as legitimate (Nordback & Espinosa, 2019; Northouse, 2015). Strengths identification may provide a means for team members to establish their unique skill sets and recognize each other as legitimate leaders. However, there has not been a great deal of empirical research to support this assumption. In this study, I narrowed these gaps in the literature by exploring employee perceptions of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach after completing a strength identification and development program.

In this section, I introduced the literature surrounding the theoretical framework of this study, which includes self-determination theory and shared leadership. In the next section, the literature related to various aspects of this study will be discussed. Specifically, the literature surrounding positive psychology and strength-based leadership, virtual and dispersed organizations, conflict resolution, and employee engagement will be reviewed.

Positive Psychology and Strengths-Based Leadership

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology was first introduced by Martin Seligman during his American Psychological Association Presidential address (Seligman, 1999). It was during this speech that Seligman emphasized that the field of psychology had been focused on what was wrong with patients and encouraged the field to begin also focusing on helping patients pursue their "best

life" and building positive qualities (Seligman, 1999). Unlike some other theories that may be described as individual level or group level theories, positive psychology focuses on the subjective, individual, and group levels (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). At the subjective level, positive psychology is about valued subjective experiences, including concepts such as contentment, flow, and optimism (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). At the individual level, positive psychology focuses on positive traits such as perseverance, forgiveness, and courage, among others (Beattie, 2019; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Lastly, at the group level, positive psychology is focused on the concepts that make individuals better contributors to society, including concepts such as responsibility, tolerance, and work ethic (Beattie, 2019; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

When Seligman first introduced positive psychology, the theory was framed as a "happiness theory" (Seligman, 2011). The foundation of this theory was that happiness could be analyzed by three elements – positive emotion, engagement, and meaning (Seligman, 2011). The focus of positive psychology has since shifted from a "happiness theory" to a "well-being" theory. The revised "well-being" theory now consists of five elements, which include positive emotion, engagement, meaning, accomplishment, and positive relationships (Seligman, 2011). The first element, positive emotion, includes three categories of positive emotion – future, past, and present (Seligman, 2002). Additionally, under the revised well-being theory, the positive emotion element also includes happiness and life satisfaction, rather than these two being separate elements (Seligman, 2011). The second element, engagement, is a subjective state that relates to whether or not an individual is completely absorbed in a task (Seligman, 2011). The third element, meaning, relates to serving something bigger than yourself (Seligman, 2011). Next, accomplishment in the context of positive psychology relates to accomplishment for the

sake of accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). Seligman (2011) pointed out that this element is almost never seen in its "pure state" as accomplishment is generally pursued as part of something else, such as engagement or positive emotion. However, Seligman (2011) added this element under well-being theory as it emphasized that positive psychology describes how individuals get to well-being rather than prescribes well-being. Lastly, the final element, positive relationships, points out that other people and community are an important aspect of positive psychology (Seligman, 2011).

Another important shift in positive psychology under "well-being" theory is the shift from the focus on increasing happiness under happiness theory to the focus on increasing the amount of flourishing under well-being theory. An individual is considered flourishing if they have positive emotions, engagement, interest, meaning, and purpose present in their life, as well as at least three of the following elements present – self-esteem, optimism, resilience, vitality, self-determination, and positive relationships (Seligman, 2011).

Strength-Based Leadership

Strengths underpins each of the five pillars of well-being theory (Seligman, 2011). The strengths philosophy is that individuals and organizations benefit more from recognizing and developing an individual's talent areas, rather than focusing on improving on their areas of weakness (Asplund et al., 2014). Seligman (2002) laid out four criteria in determining if something is a strength. First, Seligman (2002) emphasized that strengths are traits, meaning they can be seen across time and various situations. Secondly, strengths are valued in their own right (Seligman, 2002). Next, an individual's display of strength is not detrimental to those around him or her (Seligman, 2002). Lastly, Seligman (2002) emphasized that strengths are valued across most cultures.

There has been a great deal of research regarding the benefits of strengths identification and development within organizations. Generally speaking, strengths identification and development involves three steps, which include first identifying an individual's dominant talent themes, further pinpointing the individual's specific talents within those themes, and refining the identified talents using knowledge and skills (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). Strengths identification assessments have become very popular, with many schools and corporate organizations performing strengths assessment on their students, teachers, and employees. However, many organizations fail to effectively debrief the participants and utilize the results of the assessment. Roche and Hefferon (2013) emphasized that although the strengths assessment is a good starting point, discussing and understanding the results of the strengths assessment is crucial and increases the participant's ability to continue developing and using their identified strength areas. Researchers have found that the identification and development of strengths in the traditional workplace leads to an improvement in team dynamic, job satisfaction, and employee performance (MacKie, 2016; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015).

Improved Team Dynamic

Identifying and encouraging the use of strengths in the workplace leads to an overall improved team dynamic due to increased employee well-being. Specifically, researchers have found that the identification and use of strengths leads to increased self-esteem, improved emotions, and lower perceived stress for employees (Goodman et al., 2017; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015; Welch et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2011). One explanation for these improvements in employee well-being is the increased employee self-efficiency and autonomy that strengths-identification and development provides employees (Elston & Boniwell, 2011; Linley et al.,

2010). In other words, focusing on strengths may satisfy employees' need for autonomy and competency as described by self-determination theory.

Spence and Oades (2011) emphasized the importance of motivation and personal autonomy when trying to shift employee behavior. Employees are more likely to be engaged and personally invested when employers fulfill the employee's need for autonomy and self-efficacy (Elston & Boniwell, 2011). Additionally, researchers posit that self-efficacy may lead to less distress, increased resilience, and innovation. Strengths-identification and development can contribute to improved self-efficacy by providing a roadmap of the employee's competency areas, offering employees a deeper understanding of the areas in which they will naturally flourish and successfully contribute to their team or organization. The increased sense of self-efficacy, or autonomy, as well as employee's recognition that their employers are investing in them by focusing on strengths-development (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015), might explain researchers' findings that focusing on strengths leads to improved collaboration, increase self-esteem, and a more positive self-concept (Elston & Boniwell, 2011; Littmen-Ovadia et al., 2014).

Improved Job Satisfaction and Performance

A focus on strengths-development in organizations has also been found to increase job satisfaction and performance for employees. Researchers have found that in contrast to compelling employees to focus on their weaknesses, which can lead to defensiveness and resistance, focusing on employee strength development is motivating and energizing (Welch et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2011). Zimenoff (2015) emphasized that successful employee development programs provide an opportunity for employees to identify their strengths, as well as provide an understanding of how the employee fits into the organization's overall strategic

objective. Analyzed through the lens of self-determination theory, programs such as those described by Zimenoff (2015) might be successful due to their ability to satisfy employee's three basic psychological needs (Spence & Oades, 2011). Strength-based development programs provide employees an opportunity to identify and develop areas in which employees are naturally talented, increasing employees' feelings of competency and autonomy. Additionally, programs that provide employees an understanding of how the employee fits into the overall strategic objective increase the employee's sense of relatedness within the organization by emphasizing how employees contribute to the big picture of the organization.

One common issue in organizations that leads to employee disengagement is an uneven distribution of workload amongst employees. Organizations often find themselves with only a few individuals carrying the bulk of the work, while the rest of the organizations is underutilized (Baverso, 2015). Zimenoff (2015) explained that programs focused on strengths offer organizations the greatest potential for growth, increased employee contribution, and improved productivity. The identification and development of employee strength areas allows an organization to recognize employees that are underutilized, and more evenly distribute the workload throughout the organization, resulting in improved performance and more fully engaged employees (Baverso, 2015). Additionally, by focusing on strengths-development in employees, organizations often recognize previously unknown talent within the organizations. Therefore, strengths-development offers organizations an opportunity to not only motivate and reengage employees, but also more fully utilize the employees within the organization.

Limitations of the Literature

There is a significant amount of literature to support the idea that strength-based leadership leads to positive results within traditional organizations. However, there has not been

a significant amount of research surrounding the effectiveness of a strengths-based approach in dispersed organizations. Additionally, most studies focus on strengths identification and fail to develop and utilize the identified strength areas, or talent themes (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2018; Seemiller, 2017). In this study, I offered an important steppingstone in strengths-based leadership by considering the concept in a dispersed organization, as well as exploring employee perceptions of the impact and effectiveness of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strengths identification and development program, on the levels of employee engagement, trust, conflict, and shared leadership within a dispersed organization. Although the benefits of strength-based leadership established in the literature are attractive to all organizations, the effectiveness of this approach in dispersed organizations must be studied as the organizational structure poses unique challenges.

Virtual and Dispersed Organizations

Organizations today are quickly becoming more dispersed in their organizational strategy. However, the research surrounding dispersed organizations is relatively new (Hoegl & Muethel, 2016). Researchers have found that the conflicts that arise within these organizations are more complex than in traditional face-to-face organizations. Additionally, researchers have shown that although trust, communication, and employee engagement are important foundations for any organization, they are especially important within dispersed organizations.

Increased Complexity and Uniqueness

Although often taken for granted, dispersed organizations face many unique challenges that must be considered by their leaders and members. Researchers have pointed out that dispersed organizations are more difficult to manage than traditional face-to-face organizations (Lilian, 2014), and require leaders to reconsider their leadership styles and strategies (Hoegl &

Muethel, 2016). Specifically, Savolainen (2014) pointed out that one of the most significant challenges for leaders of virtual and dispersed organizations is getting comfortable with the daily activities of employees. The lack of face-to-face contact makes it difficult for leaders to have a complete understanding of the work their employees are doing, which can be difficult for a leader to accept. Alternative leadership styles for dispersed organizations that can more effectively utilize the unique talents of team members in a more "synergistic manner" can be found in a strengths-based leadership approach (MacKie, 2016). Team leaders and team members can utilize strength-based leadership in various ways, including managers using a strength-based coaching approach with their direct reports, strength-based performance reviews and leadership-development programs for team members and formal leaders, and by implementing a shared leadership approach that focuses on the strength-areas of the team members as well as the formal leader (MacKie, 2016).

In addition to work related issues, leaders and members of virtual and dispersed organizations face unique social challenges which make it difficult to satisfy employees' need for connectedness. For example, the lack of face-to-face contact amongst members makes it much easier for members to feel isolated and not part of the group. Specifically, leaders must focus on ensuring that employees do not feel as though they are members of in and out-groups (Lilian, 2014). Although in and out-groups occur within traditional organizations, the lack of close contact in virtual and dispersed organizations can not only make the in and out group dynamic easier to fall into but can also increase the negative repercussions caused by this dynamic.

Relatedly, the lack of face-to-face contact is another unique challenge faced by virtual and dispersed organizations, complicating the satisfaction of employees' need for connectedness.

Haines (2014) pointed out that the lack of face-to-face contact between team members is especially problematic due to team members' lack of awareness and understanding of their teammates and who they really are. This lack of awareness and knowledge related to their fellow team members can lead to various work related and social challenges. Researchers have pointed out that virtual and dispersed team members are often experts in their field, which changes the team dynamic and the leadership structure (Hoegl & Muethel, 2016). Instead of relying very heavily, if not solely, upon the leadership and knowledge of one particular leader, shared leadership that shifts based on the current needs of the organization can be beneficial to virtual and dispersed teams (Hoegl & Muethel, 2016). This leadership approach allows teams and their formal leaders more flexibility in engaging team members and their unique capabilities, as well as increases the level of trust and cohesion among teams (MacKie, 2016; Nordback & Espinosa, 2019). Analyzed through the lens of self-determination theory, a shared leadership approach may be successful in these situations due to the satisfaction of the employees' need for competency, which is addressed by recognizing the employees' capabilities. Additionally, the employees' need for connectedness is addressed through working together as a team to share the leadership role between team members. Lastly, the employees' need for autonomy is addressed by allowing the employees to focus on their areas of expertise. However, in order for this shared responsibility to successfully occur, team members must have enough familiarity with one another to be aware of and respect their team members' unique skills and knowledge, as well as understand their own unique contributions. Strengths assessments, such as the StrengthsFinder 2.0, provide a means to raise awareness of team members' unique skill sets and how they align with others in the organization (MacKie, 2016).

Importance of Trust

All functional organizations are highly reliant upon the trust amongst its team members, and dispersed organizations are no exception. In fact, researchers have found that trust is even more important in virtual and dispersed organizations than in traditional organizations and is an essential element of a functioning dispersed organization (Ford et al., 2017; Lilian, 2014). However, trust within virtual and dispersed organizations is complex. Researchers have found that while creating trust is one of the key tasks for the leader of a dispersed organization, it is also one of the top challenges faced by these organizations (Ford et al., 2017; Lilian, 2014; Savolainen, 2014).

The strategy to build trust within these organizations is still somewhat debated. Hoegl and Muethel (2016) posited that building trust within virtual and dispersed organizations is based on team leaders developing trust not only in the members of the organizations, but in the capabilities of those members and their leadership potential. In contrast, Ford et al. (2017) indicated that building team member trust is predicated on team leaders providing defined responsibilities linked to a defined mission. These approaches to building trust seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum in their foundational attitude towards leadership. One end of the spectrum focuses on allowing employees freedom through trust, or autonomous motivation, while the other end focuses on building trust with employees through providing a clearly defined structure for employees, or controlled motivation. In this study, I worked to narrow an important gap in this literature by exploring employee perception of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach, implemented through identifying and developing strengths, which follows Hoegl and Muethel's (2016) theory of building trust by developing an understanding and trust in team members' unique capabilities.

Importance of Communication

Another significant consideration for virtual and dispersed organizations is the important and complicated nature of communication within these organizations. In other words, satisfying the employee's need for connectedness can be more complicated in virtual and dispersed environments. Aime et al. (2014) explained that one of the most difficult aspects of virtual teams is the inability of leaders to manage the unique conflict and emotions present within these organizations. Researchers have indicated that the lack of face-to-face communication between virtual and dispersed team members could be a primary factor in this inability. Specifically, the lack of face-to-face communication can lead team members to feel as though they are forgotten or unappreciated (Ford et al., 2017). Additionally, there are many nonverbal and subtle cues that are missed when communication is done electronically, including tone of voice and facial expressions. If not handled correctly, these missing cues can easily lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations within virtual and dispersed organizations.

Another important consideration regarding communication in virtual and dispersed organizations is the team members' primary reliance upon their leader for communication, both formally and informally. Due to a lack of face-to-face contact, virtual team members often do not have the benefit of informal communication that might take place in the break room or after a meeting. These informal meetings often provide an important dissemination of information throughout a team. In this sense, team members in face-to-face organizations have the benefit of not only relying on their leader for information but can also rely on their fellow team members for information, especially informal information (Ford et al., 2017). However, this may not occur as easily in virtual and dispersed organizations where team members might not have as much informal communication between one another. Therefore, leaders must be mindful of the

increased reliance upon them to ensure that important information is communicated to all team members, and therefore must actively communicate more frequently and openly with their employees (Madlock, 2012). Viewed through the lens of self-determination theory, leaders must focus on building a relationship with their followers and on building team cohesiveness, as that is their only means to satisfy the employee's need for connectedness.

Communication issues can be detrimental to a virtual or dispersed organization. Not only can lack of communication lead to work related issues and errors, but researchers have also pointed out that communication plays an important role in the level of trust within the organization, as well as the satisfaction and performance of employees (Madlock, 2012; Savolainen, 2014). Ford et al. (2017) indicated that a virtual or dispersed team will only be successful if they are able to effectively communicate with one another.

Limitations of the Literature

The unique complexities present within dispersed organizations emphasize the importance of preparing leaders for the transition from traditional face-to-face leadership to leadership of a dispersed organization. While there is acknowledgement in the current literature of the complexity of leading virtual and dispersed organizations (Ford et al., 2017; Lilian, 2014), there is still disagreement regarding how to effectively manage and lead these organizations. Additional research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of how leaders can effectively lead these organizations and satisfy employees' needs (Ford et al., 2017; Hoch & Dulebohn, 2017; Lilian, 2014), including managing the level of conflict, trust, and employee engagement within these organizations. In this study, I aimed to narrow this gap in the literature by exploring employee perceptions of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach,

implemented through identifying strengths, on the conflict, trust, and employee engagement within a dispersed organization.

Conflict Resolution

There has also been a significant amount of research surrounding conflict resolution. Researchers have found there are varying types of conflict within organizations, some of which can be beneficial to organizations. Additionally, researchers have found that there are certain foundational issues that lead to conflict within organizations.

Types of Conflict

Researchers generally agree upon the types of conflict that occur within teams and organizations. Cognitive conflict, also referred to as task conflict, is described as disagreement within organizations revolving around the content and work-related products and issues within the group (Adair et al., 2017; Ayoko et al., 2012; Humphrey et al., 2017). In contrast, affective conflict, also referred to as relationship conflict, is described as a disagreement revolving around interpersonal and social issues. Additionally, some researchers have included a third conflict type, process conflict, which is described as conflict revolving around how a task is completed (Adair et al., 2017).

Benefits of Conflict

Although researchers generally agree upon the types of conflicts that occur within organizations, there is some debate regarding whether certain types of conflict can be beneficial to organizations. Adair et al. (2017) pointed out that the impact that conflict has on a group or organization is not solely dependent upon the type of conflict that occurs, but also on the dynamics of the group, including how open the group is to conflict and honest discussion.

Most researchers agree that relationship conflict is detrimental to organizations. Specifically, Humphrey et al. (2017) indicated that relationship conflict is damaging to communication within an organization and can cross-over into task conflict as well. Similarly, Xie and Luan (2014) posited that task conflict can also transition into relationship conflict and become harmful to an organization.

Overall, researchers agree that although some levels of conflict may be beneficial to organizations, unresolved and mishandled conflicts are detrimental to the organization. O'Neill and Allen (2014) posited that teams who have successfully navigated conflict are often more integrated, whereas teams with unresolved conflict often remain deadlocked with one another. In other words, resolved conflict may lead to the satisfaction of a group's need for connectedness, whereas unresolved conflict erodes the group's feeling of connectedness. Therefore, it is not the conflict that is beneficial to the organization, but rather the strategies used by the team or organization to overcome the conflict (Dimas & Lourenço, 2015), and reestablish the connectedness of the group.

Issues That Lead to Conflict

Although there are seemingly endless situations that could lead to tension within organizations, there are certain foundational issues that researchers have determined lead to conflict. One of the most important considerations is the conflict culture within an organization (Dimas & Lourenço, 2015). Dimas and Lourenço (2015) pointed out that leaders must be aware of the conflict culture they create within their organization as a leader's conflict management style can have a rippling effect throughout an organization. This is an especially important consideration in dispersed organizations. The lack of face-to-face interaction and the potential

for decreased communication amongst team members within dispersed organizations could potentially lead to different conflict cultures within different sub-groups of the organization.

Researchers have also pointed out that trust, or a lack thereof, can lead to conflict within an organization. This is especially true in virtual and dispersed organizations due to the inability of team members to see one another face-to-face (Ayoko et al., 2012). As dispersed organizations become more commonplace, it is essential for leaders to understand how to nourish the level of trust amongst team members.

Another common issue that leads to conflict in organizations is the power struggle that often occurs within groups. Aime et al. (2014) noted that although it is often believed that stable hierarchies are beneficial to groups as they can provide structure and stability, organizations that allow power to shift between team members based on situational demands have been shown to be beneficial as well. However, the benefits seen from these power shifts can only be seen if the team members view the new leader's actions as legitimate. Strengths identification and development could provide a means of acknowledging an employee's knowledge power as legitimate in certain situations, empowering the team members to acknowledge and accept a more fluid and shared organizational structure.

Limitations of the Literature

The significant role that conflict has within traditional organizations and the importance of understanding the drivers of conflict within organizations is emphasized in the literature. Additionally, researchers have begun to acknowledge the unique challenges faced by virtual and dispersed organizations and the impact these challenges have on the level of conflict within these organizations. However, the literature surrounding empirically tested solutions to address conflict within dispersed organizations is currently limited. In this study, I aimed to narrow this

gap by exploring employee perceptions of the effectiveness of a shared leadership approach, implemented through identifying strengths, on the conflict, trust, and employee engagement within a dispersed organization.

Employee Engagement

There has been a significant amount of research surrounding employee engagement, and the importance of employee engagement is well established in the literature (Kang & Busser, 2018). However, currently there is a lack of consensus in the literature surrounding employee engagement, including the definition of employee engagement, and what impacts it within organizations (Burnett & Lisk, 2019; Kang & Busser, 2018). In this section, I will discuss the current understanding of employee engagement in literature, the benefits of employee engagement, and the current literature surrounding how employee engagement can be increased.

Definition of Employee Engagement

Although there is disagreement in the literature regarding the definition of employee engagement, there are certain foundational aspects of engagement that are consistent throughout the literature. First, researchers generally agree that work engagement is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Kang & Busser, 2018; Kuijpers et al., 2019). Vigor relates to an individual's levels of energy and persistence in their work, and their willingness to work hard (Kang & Busser, 2018; Li et al., 2019; Raza & Nadeem, 2018). Next, dedication relates to an individual's level of commitment to their work, as well as the degree of pride and involvement they have in their work (Kang & Busser, 2018; Li et al., 2019; Raza & Nadeem, 2018). Lastly, absorption relates to the levels of concentration and focus an individual has in their work, as well as the feelings of happiness and enjoyment individuals get from their work (Li et al., 2019; Raza & Nadeem, 2018).

Secondly, researchers generally agree that individuals move on an engagement continuum, rather than remain fully disengaged or fully engaged at all times (Kahn, 1990; Maylett & Warner, 2014). In one of the foundational discussions on employee engagement, Kahn (1990) described employees as moving on an engagement continuum ranging from personal engagement to personal disengagement. Personal engagement is described as the expression of the employee's preferred self that promotes connection with their work and other members of the organization; physical, cognitive, and emotional presence; and full performance in their role (Kahn, 1990). Simply stated, engaged employees express their thoughts and beliefs about their work, as well as connect with the other members of the organization (Kahn, 1990). At the opposite end of the engagement continuum, disengaged employees are described as withdrawing and separating themselves from their role through physical, cognitive, and emotional disconnection (Kahn, 1990).

The importance of employee engagement, as described by Kahn (1990) may be best understood through the lens of self-determination theory. As previously discussed, according to self-determination theory, individuals need autonomy, connectedness, and competency (Deci et al., 2017). Using Kahn's (1990) definition of employee engagement, employee engagement appears to satisfy each of these psychological needs.

Benefits of Employee Engagement

Increased employee engagement is beneficial for both employees and the organizations they are a part of. Researchers have found that organizations with engaged employees show improved employee performance and decreased turnover (Burnett & Lisk, 2019; Kuijpers et al., 2019; Maylett & Warner, 2014), as well as improved organizational outcomes and increased profitability (Burnett & Lisk, 2019; Maylett & Warner, 2014). In contrast, disengaged employees

have been found to be toxic to their teams and organizations, negatively impacting organizational performance (Burnett & Lisk, 2019). Maylett and Warner (2014) went so far as to propose that organizations must either engage their disengaged employees or fire them due to the negative impact these employees have on the organization as a whole.

Increasing Employee Engagement

Although the literature discusses opportunities for organizations to increase employee engagement, researchers have found that many organizations are focusing too heavily on measuring employee engagement (Burnett & Lisk, 2019; Maylett & Warner, 2014) or focusing on the wrong areas, such as employee perks and compensation (Maylett & Warner, 2014). Therefore, it is important to discuss the literature surrounding effective approaches organizations can use to increase employee engagement. Kahn (1990) posited that employees engage or withdraw based on their assessment of three psychological conditions present at the time in their work and organization, which include meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Self-determination theory can be used to analyze the effectiveness of the various approaches to increase employee engagement described in the literature, including the importance of meaningfulness, safety, and availability.

Autonomy. Kahn (1990) explained that individuals value psychological meaningfulness in their work, which is described as feeling as though the work being done is worthwhile and makes a difference. Further, employees are more likely to experience psychological meaningfulness when the work they are doing is challenging and somewhat autonomous (Kahn, 1990). Researchers have found that individuals who had autonomy, or some level of control over their work, experienced increased psychological safety, which Kahn (1990) described as an individual's ability to engage without fear of negative consequences. Researchers have described

various approaches to improve employee engagement that are grounded in increasing employee autonomy, including job crafting. Job crafting refers to proactive, employee initiated changes to their role and the boundaries of their work (Kuijpers et al., 2019; Petrou et al., 2016). Kuijpers et al. (2019) suggested that job crafting can increase employee engagement and described various types of job crafting that can be implemented in organizations, including job crafting towards strengths, job crafting towards interests, and job crafting towards development. However, job crafting towards strengths was the only approach that was positively associated with all three dimensions of work engagement – vigor, dedication, and absorption (Kuijpers et al., 2019). Kuijpers et al. (2019) emphasized that in order for job crafting towards strengths to effectively increase employee engagement, employees must have insight into their personal strengths.

Connectedness. Connectedness, in the context of self-determination theory, is described as an employee's desire to feel as though they belong (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Maylett and Warner (2014) posited that organizations often experience employee-related issues when they focus on perks and compensation instead of focusing on the environment and culture within an organization. Additionally, Burnett and Lisk (2019) emphasized that trust and the relationship between employees and their managers influences the level of employee engagement. Organizations can increase employee engagement by creating a culture of collaboration (Maylett & Warner, 2014; Raza & Nadeem, 2018), open communication (Maylett & Warner, 2014; Raza & Nadeem, 2018), and promoting shared values (Maylett & Warner, 2014). Kahn (1990) expanded on the importance of connectedness by emphasizing that employees experience psychological meaningfulness and safety when their work involves meaningful interpersonal interactions with others. In contrast, when an employee's work does not involve meaningful connection with others or when there are negative group dynamics employees do not feel as

much psychological safety, which is detrimental to the level of employee engagement within the organization (Kahn, 1990). Similarly, researchers have found that negative emotional expression by group leaders leads to low work engagement in employees, resulting in poor performance (Li et al., 2019).

Competency. Lastly, competency, in the context of self-determination theory, is described as an individual's need to feel mastery (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Relatedly, Kahn (1990) emphasized the importance of psychological availability, which relates to an employee's ability to engage. Kahn (1990) explained that various factors influence an individual's level of psychological availability, including their levels of emotional energy and insecurity. The importance of employees' feeling of competency and its impact on emotional energy are emphasized in self-determination theory. Ryan and Deci (2017) explained that experiences that satisfy an individual's basic needs, including discovering a new skill as a competence satisfaction, can increase the individual's level of vitality.

Burnett and Lisk (2019) posited that an organization's focus on employee development and employee growth opportunities has a direct impact on the level of employee engagement by impacting their feelings of competency. More specifically, Kuijpers et al. (2019) encouraged the use of identification and development of strength areas to increase employee engagement. Kuijpers et al. (2019) explained that focusing on strengths has a domino effect that leads to increased engagement – focusing on strengths leads to attaining goals, which results in positive feedback and a related feeling of mastery and self-efficiency for the employee, which is correlated with employee engagement.

Limitations of the Literature

Various important aspects of employee engagement are established in the literature, including the three characteristics of employee engagement – vigor, dedication, and absorption; the idea that employee engagement is a continuum rather than a stagnant state; the various benefits of engaged employees; as well as approaches that can be used to increase employee engagement within organizations. However, there are limitations of this literature that must be considered. First, although the importance of employee engagement and a theoretical base for various approaches to improve employee engagement have been established, there has not been a significant amount of empirical analysis surrounding approaches that can be used to increase employee engagement. Instead, much of the research and practice has focused on simply measuring employee engagement (Burnett & Lisk, 2019; Maylett & Warner, 2014). Additionally, although researchers have acknowledged that employee engagement is especially important in light of the increasingly dispersed nature of organizations (Maylett & Warner, 2014), there has not been a significant amount of empirical research surrounding employee engagement considerations specific to these organizations. In this study, I helped narrow these gaps in the literature by utilizing a case study approach to gain an understanding of employee perception of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach, implemented through identifying strengths, on employee engagement within a dispersed organization.

Summary

Researchers have pointed out that virtual and dispersed organizations face unique challenges that leaders of traditional organizations may be unprepared to take on (Ford et al., 2017), including issues surrounding the levels of conflict, trust, and employee engagement within these organizations. Self-determination theory and shared leadership serve as the

theoretical framework for this study. In this study, I aimed to explore employee perceptions of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach, implemented through identifying strengths, on employee engagement, team member trust, and affective conflict within a dispersed organization. In this chapter, I synthesized the current literature surrounding this problem, as well as identified the current gaps in the literature that were addressed through this study. In the next chapter, the research design and methodology will be introduced.

Chapter 3: Research Method and Design

In the previous chapter, I provided a summary of the current literature surrounding the various aspects of this study, including strength-based leadership, virtual and dispersed organizations, conflict resolution, and employee engagement. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how a shared-leadership approach, implemented through identifying strengths, impacts employee engagement, team member trust, and affective conflict. Therefore, I chose a qualitative case study methodology as I wanted to understand the perspectives of the participants on the impact the shared leadership approach, implemented through a strengths-based intervention, had on the organization. This study was designed as an embedded single-case study, and I used documentation and semistructured interviews to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact and effectiveness of a strength identification and development program on developing the shared leadership within their organization?

RQ2. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the employee engagement within their organization?

RQ3. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the trust within their organization?

RQ4. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the conflict within their organization?

In this chapter, I will discuss the research method and design of this study. First, the research design and participants will be examined. Next, data collection and analysis will be considered. Finally, the ethical considerations, assumptions, and limitations of this study will be addressed.

Research Design

In this study, I utilized a qualitative, embedded single-case study design. I used documentation and semistructured interviews to collect data from participants. In this section I will discuss the design of this study, and why an embedded single-case study approach was appropriate to address the purpose of this study.

Case study research offers many benefits when compared to other research approaches and is often considered the best approach for certain studies. Yin (2018) defined a case study as an empirical method that examines a case in depth within a real-world context. This research approach is often most appropriate when the researcher wants to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon within a real-world context (Yin, 2018) as well as when the research is exploratory in nature (Hughes & McDonagh, 2017).

With this study, I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach, implemented through identifying strengths, on employee engagement, team member trust, and affective conflict, within a dispersed organization. Currently, there is a large amount of theoretical literature surrounding strengths-based development programs. However, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how a strengths program impacts dispersed organizations. Many previous approaches have utilized a quantitative survey approach (Goodman et al., 2017; Harzer & Ruch, 2014; MacKie, 2014; Sheldon et al., 2015; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015). However, Yin (2018) proposed that one of the benefits of

case studies over surveys is that surveys are limited in their ability to understand the context of the problem or phenomenon. Context plays an important role when considering the impact that developmental programs have on organizations and the individuals within them. Additionally, MacKie (2016) emphasized the importance of context in strength-based leadership development programs as strengths cannot be assessed in isolation and leadership does not exist in a vacuum.

However, although a case study design is beneficial in many instances, researchers have expressed concern around this design that must also be considered. Specifically, some researchers have suggested that case studies may not be rigorous enough (Yin, 2018). This belief is often due to researchers not following systematic procedures in their case studies and allowing vague evidence to shape their conclusions. Using an embedded single-case study design, rather than a holistic case study design, is one way that this can be avoided as the embedded single-case study design can help focus a study. Additionally, subunit analysis can also add meaningful insight into a case study analysis.

In this chapter, I addressed the procedures that were followed for this study. Additionally, Baxter and Jack (2008) provided a basic structure that should be considered to strengthen the validity and credibility of a case study. Among other things, these elements include carefully and systematically collecting and managing data, and analyzing the data correctly (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In this chapter, I addressed the precautions that were taken to carefully and systematically collect and analyze the data.

This study could be accomplished using many different methodological approaches. However, a case study design provided an opportunity to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the perceptions of employees after completing a strengths development program. In the next

section, I discussed the participants in the study and why the organization and the individual

participants were appropriate for this case study.

Participants and Case Study Selection

Yin (2018) explained that there are five rationales for a single-case design, including

critical case rationale, extreme case rationale, common case rationale, revelatory case rationale,

and longitudinal case rationale. I utilized the critical case rationale for this study. Under this

rationale, a single case is used to determine whether certain theoretical propositions are true,

which can then be used for future research in the field (Yin, 2018).

Hyett et al. (2014) explained that researchers using a case study approach should seek out

what is common and what is unique about the case being studied. I purposefully selected the

organization from which participants were chosen in this study because of the strengths

identification program that was implemented by the group, as well as the commonality of the

dispersed structure and shared leadership present within the organization.

Strengths Intervention

The program developed by the organization followed an intervention approach that is

common in literature and in practice (MacKie, 2016). Specifically, the organization used a

bespoke and individualized positive oriented development program. The employees of the

organization took the StrengthsFinder 2.0 assessment and reviewed their results on their own.

The employees then participated in a group coaching session with a certified strengths coach.

During this session, the team members were coached on their individual strength areas, as well

as the group strength dynamics. Lastly, each participant was given follow up instructions and

asked to follow up with the strengths coach after completing their individual work.

Dispersed Organization

Lilian (2014) explained that organizations are shifting from solely face to face structures to broader, more dynamic structures that may cross geographical boundaries. One example of this is public accounting firms, which are becoming increasingly dispersed in nature. Individuals within these organizations often spend much of their time working at a client's place of business, rather than at the accountant's office, as this provides more direct access to clients. Additionally, many public accounting firms are offering increased flexibility as a benefit to their employees, including the ability to work from home at times (Knight, 2020). The participants in this study included individuals that worked for a national public accounting firm (referred to throughout as the "Firm"). All the participants worked primarily in the tax department and were of various levels within the company.

The dispersed nature of the organization at the center of this case study was multifaceted. The participants in this study spent much of their time working remotely, either at a client site or from home. However, the individuals also spent time working onsite together at their home office. Additionally, individuals were often assigned to smaller teams for various work assignments. In many instances, these smaller teams may work together at a client site, at the home office, or remotely from one another. Lastly, the individuals that participated in this study worked in an office that is part of a national organization. Often individuals from different offices throughout the country may work together for various assignments. Therefore, the dispersed nature of the organization was complex, as the individuals may be co-located with certain members of the organization but working virtually with others dispersed throughout the country.

Shared Leadership

The shared leadership that took place within the organization is also multifaceted. Individuals were often members of various teams while serving different clients. Often, an individual was a leader of one team, but a follower in the larger organizational structure or even a follower in a different team. This is an important consideration for virtual and dispersed organizations as this shifting of leadership allows for these organizations to flow with the expertise of the individuals (Nordback & Espinosa, 2019).

Individual Participants

In this study, I utilized purposive sampling for within-case sampling decisions. Specifically, purposive sampling was used to select the individual participants from within the organization at the center of this case study. This sampling method involved deliberately selecting participants based on the individual's ability to provide insight into the research questions being studied (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). The criteria for the individual participants included individuals who participated in the strengths-development program, participated in dispersed leadership within the organization, and were still employed by the organization at the time of the case study. A total of 10 individuals from this organization participated in the strengths program, and six individuals agreed to participate in this study.

To recruit the individual participants, I obtained a list of potential participants who met the participation criteria from the partner in charge of the office. I then solicited participants by email invitation, which can be found in Appendix A. The invitation included an introduction of myself and a description of the case study, including an explanation of the risks to the participant and the time commitment involved, the participant criteria, and an explanation that participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time, without penalty.

The strengths intervention, dispersed nature, and shared leadership that took place in the organization at the center of this case study are common to many other dispersed organizations, and organizations implementing a strengths-based approach. Therefore, the organization and individual participants at the center of this case study were used to gain a deeper understanding of the research questions. However, there are also certain unique attributes to the case that must be considered. These unique attributes will be further discussed in the limitations section of this chapter.

Data Collection and Analysis

Using multiple sources of evidence is one of the principles of case study design. In this case study, I utilized documentation and interviews to collect data. Each of these sources of data will be discussed in this section.

Interviews

In this case study, I utilized semistructured, multiple perspective interviews to collect data. Brinkmann (2013) explained that semistructured interviews are often preferable to structured or unstructured interviews as they allow the interviewee to emphasize or explore different angles that arise during the interview while still allowing the interviewer to focus the interview. Additionally, multiple perspective interviews provide a deep and nuanced understanding of a group's working dynamics and the different perspectives of individuals within the group (Vogl et al., 2017). The interviews were conducted by video conference with each participant separately, rather than as a group. This allowed the interviewer to focus the conversation on areas that were important to the research topic and relevant to each participant's perspective (Brinkmann, 2013), as well as avoid any discomfort to the participant that may have been caused by discussing their experiences and perceptions with their co-workers.

Saldana and Omasta (2018) encouraged researchers conducting semistructured interviews to develop a detailed list of questions that covers all areas of interest. The interview protocol for this study, which can be found in Appendix B, included specific questions in the areas of team member trust, conflict among team members, and team member engagement, as well as a general discussion around the strengths development program utilized by the organization and the shared leadership experienced by the participants.

Analysis of Interview Data. Various approaches can be used to analyze qualitative interview data. However, for this study, I utilized value coding. Saldana and Omasta (2018) explained that value coding is appropriate for almost all qualitative studies, but it is especially effective for studies exploring intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences in case studies.

The audio files from the interviews were initially transcribed using Trint.com, which is a secure, encrypted, data transcription site. Once the data were initially transcribed using Trint, I then reviewed the audio files and the transcripts to ensure the interviews were accurately transcribed. After the interview data were transcribed, I began the examination and coding process. As this study involves understanding multiple perspectives, I performed two phases of examination and coding. First, I examined and coded each participant's interview using NVivo coding software, identifying each value, attitude, and belief discussed in the interview (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). The focus during this first phase of analysis was to identify and understand any recurring themes for each individual participant. Once the first phase of coding was complete, I created an individual interview profile for each participant that included coded interview data, as well as a description of the participant's nonverbal cues observed during the interview.

Next, each individual interview was compared within the group to gain an understanding of the relational unit (Vogl et al., 2017). This included comparing the different individuals' perspectives and creating an inventory of central themes for the group as a whole. This group analysis also included identifying areas in which the participants converged or diverged (Vogl et al., 2017).

Documentation

In addition to the participant interviews, documentation was used to collect data for this study. Yin (2018) explained that documentation can be used to corroborate other data collected and provide additional dimensions to a case study. This data collection technique provided valuable support to the interviews performed.

The strengths-development program developed by the organization featured various Gallup strengths coaching resources, which can be broken down into three main categories. The first category of documentation provided by the coach is general informational resources related to strengths. The second category of documentation provided by the coach analyzed the strengths of the team members together. The last category of documentation provided by the coach included worksheets for the individual participants to complete that further analyzed their individual strength areas.

Analysis of Documentation. I utilized content analysis to analyze the documentation collected during this study. Saldana and Omasta (2018) described content analysis as a systematic approach to examining the topic, theme, concepts, and ideas of print material. In this study, I utilized content analysis to identify and examine the themes and concepts within the documentation prepared and distributed by the strengths coach as part of the strength

development program. Each document collected was reviewed and coded based on the identified themes within each document.

Data Synthesis and Member Checking

Once the initial analysis of the data was completed, the data were synthesized and analyzed collectively. During this phase of the data analysis, I looked for themes within the interview data collected. Additionally, I looked for relationships between the documentation data collected and the interview themes. Once this data synthesis process was complete, I utilized member checking to further triangulate the data. This process involved reviewing the themes from the data with the participants to ensure the participants agreed the themes accurately reflected their experiences. Member checking was performed after the data synthesis process to ensure no individually identifiable information was provided to the participants.

Validity and Reliability

The validity and trustworthiness of a study is dependent upon the context of the research, and the relevance of the conclusions that are drawn from the study (FitzPatrick, 2019). Brinkmann (2013) pointed out that one of the main challenges of using interviews as a primary source of data is ensuring the validity of the interview reports. Specifically, these threats include participants misremembering experiences, as well as interviewers misinterpreting interviewee responses. Creswell (2014) explained that the concepts of validity and reliability do not carry the same meaning in qualitative research as they do in quantitative research. In a qualitative context, these concepts are often referred to as trustworthiness (Amankwaa, 2016). Guba and Lincoln developed four criteria for establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative data, which include credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability (Amankwaa, 2016).

Credibility and Confirmability

Credibility is described as confidence in the truth of a study's findings (Amankwaa, 2016). Similarly, confirmability is described as the neutrality of a study, and the extent to which a study's findings are driven by the participants rather than researcher bias (Amankwaa, 2016). In this study, I utilized triangulation and member checking to establish credibility and confirmability. Generally, triangulation involves using different data sources to establish a comprehensive justification for the themes that emerge from the data (Creswell, 2014). In the context of this study, I triangulated the perspectives of the various participants to establish comprehensive themes in the study and establish the credibility and confirmability of these findings. Additionally, I utilized member checking, which involved reviewing the themes from the data with the participants to ensure the participants agreed the themes accurately reflected the participants' experience.

Transferability

Transferability refers to whether the findings of a study are applicable in other settings (Amankwaa, 2016). In this study, I utilized thick descriptions to increase the transferability of the study's findings. Providing detailed descriptions of the study and its findings will allow readers of the study to determine whether the findings are transferable to another context (Amankwaa, 2016). Creswell (2014) explained that by providing rich, thick descriptions in a study, the results become more realistic and can increase the validity of a study.

Dependability

Dependability can be described as the stability of data collected and whether the findings of a study are consistent and could be repeated (Amankwaa, 2016). Creswell (2014) suggested various procedures to increase the stability of qualitative studies, including reviewing transcripts

to ensure they were accurately transcribed and reviewing coding to ensure there is not a drift in the definition of the codes. Both processes were utilized throughout this study to increase the dependability of the data collected.

Researcher's Role

I am a certified public accountant and worked in public accounting at the beginning of my career. Therefore, I am familiar with the industry and its standard work practices. I did not work for the subject organization. However, I do have a professional relationship with a different office of the subject organization. I do not currently work with any of the potential participants of this study, nor does my relationship with the other office of the organization provide me with any influence over the potential participants in the study. My professional contacts at the other office do not hold any authority over the participants in this case study. Therefore, the conflict between my professional relationship with the other office of the organization and my role as a researcher is minimal and was addressed through the consent form (see Appendix C), which clearly stated that individuals were free to participate or decline to participate. Additionally, the consent form stated that participants could withdrawal from the study at any time, and their information would be kept strictly confidential.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are an important part of any study. Two important ethical considerations include participant consent and confidentiality. In this section, I discuss the details of how I addressed these ethical considerations for this study.

Consent

Saldana and Omasta (2018) emphasized that one of the most important legal and ethical issues for researchers is obtaining informed consent from participants. Most importantly,

researchers must clearly communicate to participants what participation in the study entails, including what the participants will be asked to do and what will be done with the information collected. Additionally, participants who consent to the study must have the ability to revoke their consent at any point throughout the study. I received permission from the partner in charge of the specific office of the organization, located in the Southern United States, to use the organization for this case study, and I also obtained consent from each individual participant. The partner in charge verified that legal department approval was not required, as no identifying information was used in the study. I provided each potential participant a consent form by email prior to their interview, describing the details of study, including what their participation would entail and what would be done with the data collected. The consent form also indicated that the participants could withdrawal from the study at any point. I provided this form and discussed it verbally with each participant to ensure they fully understood the details of the study and what their participation would entail.

Confidentiality

Another important ethical consideration is the issue of confidentiality (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). I did not use any identifying information in reporting the results of my study, including names of the individual participants or the organization. I assigned each participant a pseudonym, which was used throughout the study. Additionally, all documentation, including any documents that contained the real names of the participants, was stored in a locked cabinet inside my personal residence. Any electronic documentation that included participant names was stored in a password protected file. One specific concern participants might have had was that their responses would be discussed with their superiors or the strengths program leader.

However, I assured the participants that their individual responses would be kept strictly confidential and would not be shared.

This study was reviewed by Abilene Christian University's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix D). The study posed minimal risk to participants as participation in the study was voluntary and I did not use any identifying information in reporting the results of my study. Additionally, I took the necessary steps to ensure that all identifying information is kept strictly confidential.

Assumptions

One assumption within this study was that participants would provide honest feedback in their interviews. I addressed this risk in a couple of ways. First, I assured the participants that the views and opinions expressed in their interviews would be kept confidential from their co-workers and superiors. Secondly, I did not use their names or any identifying information in the results of my study. Additionally, using multiperspective interviews allowed me to identify any significant divergence in respondent answers, which might indicate dishonesty.

Limitations

Certain limitations were present within this study. First, this case study involved an organization that is focused on one industry – public accounting. Although I believe this case is representative of the trend in many organizations, there may be some unique attributes to public accounting firms that would not occur in other industries.

Secondly, the individuals in the study all participated in the same strengths identification and development program, internally developed by the organization, which utilized the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment and coaching methodology. Different strengths identification and development programs may have more or less of an impact than the program utilized by the

participants in the study. However, the structure of the program utilized by the organization is commonly discussed in the literature (MacKie, 2016).

Lastly, virtuality and dispersion can occur at varying degrees within organizations. The organization at the center of this case study is not solely virtually based. Instead, the organization is structured so that there are offices throughout the United States that employees consider their primary office. However, much of the employees' time is spent at client sites dispersed throughout the country. Therefore, employees of this organization periodically had the chance to meet face-to-face with other employees in the organization, whether it be at a client site, at their local office, or at a firm gathering. It is important to consider that the employees of the subject organization might have had different experiences than employees of an organization that never have the opportunity to meet in a face-to-face environment.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced the research method and design that were utilized for this study. I utilized a qualitative case study approach to gain a deeper understanding of employee perceptions of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach, implemented through identifying strengths, on employee engagement, team member trust, and affective conflict within a dispersed organization. The discussion in this chapter included an introduction to the research design, participants, as well as the process for data collection and analysis. Additionally, the ethical considerations, assumptions, and limitations of this study were addressed.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative embedded single case study was to explore employee perceptions of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach, implemented through identifying strengths, on employee engagement, team member trust, and affective conflict within a dispersed organization. To address this purpose, I explored the following research questions:

RQ1. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact and effectiveness of a strength identification and development program on developing the shared leadership within their organization?

RQ2. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the employee engagement within their organization?

RQ3. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the trust within their organization?

RQ4. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the conflict within their organization?

As previously noted, the participants for this study were employees of the Firm, a national public accounting firm, who completed the strengths identification and development program and were still employed by the Firm at the time of my study. I contacted the eight participants that were still employed by the Firm at the time of my study and received positive responses from six.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Name	Gender	Years at firm
Bay	Male	2
Bobbi	Male	2
Corey	Male	3
Adrian	Female	4
Ash	Female	2
Blake	Female	6

As shown in Table 1, the six participants were evenly split between male and female. The participants had from 2 to 6 years of tenure with the Firm. The average time employed by the Firm was 3 years.

I conducted one-on-one interviews with each of these participants via Zoom, a web-based video conferencing platform. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed using Trint. The transcribed interviews were then reviewed and coded for themes.

As discussed in Chapter 3, I used a semistructured interview protocol. The interview protocol included specific questions in the areas of team member trust, conflict amongst team members, and team member engagement, as well as a general discussion around the strengths development program utilized by the organization and the shared leadership experienced by the participants. In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss the themes of the interviews conducted as they relate to each research question.

Research Question 1

RQ1: How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact and effectiveness of a strength identification and development program on developing the shared leadership within their organization? Overall, the participants in the study felt that the strengths identification and development program had a positive impact on the shared leadership within the group. In some instances, the participants had differing views of the shared leadership within the group prior to completing the program. Specifically, four of the participants felt that there was some degree of shared leadership within the group prior to completing the program, whereas the remaining two participants felt that there was a strong reliance on a top-down hierarchical approach prior to the program.

However, all the participants felt that the strengths identification and development program improved the shared leadership within the group regardless of their view of the shared leadership within the group prior to completing the program. Two common explanations for the increased shared leadership within the group were improved communication, as well as an increase in self-leadership. Bay explained,

> I think it was mostly the same in our tasks, but I think in how we communicated… is where it changed because we were more self-aware of basically kind of the what gets people to, what gets people motivated. So how to get them to get a task done, whether it's constant, you know… Almost like micromanaging or letting them, individuals being self-responsible for completing things or meeting deadlines, so I think that was it, was playing to how everybody works well and what makes the team more efficient.

Ash also felt that the strengths identification and development program changed the way the group communicated as well as opened communication within the team around what

motivated the individuals to do their best work. She explained that this increased understanding of the individuals' motivation changed the way tasks were assigned. Specifically, Ash noted that this increased understanding of motivation led to assigning tasks based on strengths rather than availability.

Similarly, Blake felt that the strengths identification and development program encouraged the participants to open-up with one another. Blake also felt that the program helped the participants to recognize their strength areas and determine what they were best at.

Adrian felt that there was a distinct change in the group's approach to leadership. She explained:

> [I] would say we absolutely do a shared leadership. I think that maybe, again, I don't know if it's time or the people or whatever, but prior to the program, I think there was a little bit more of a… I felt like I had a lot more of the burden of doing and making a lot more decisions. And now I just sort of set and I when I see the direction, it's like, oh, we just need to be moving that way-ish, right. Let them kind of figure out what that means just because I think that, you know, everyone's a little bit different and … even in their role, they have different strengths. But I do think … the leadership structure has really changed. I think that I think they've taken on a lot more active leadership roles.

Overall, the participants indicated that these changing dynamics within the group resulted in increased shared leadership within the group. Although the participants had varying perspectives on the increase in shared leadership within the group, the most common causes discussed were increased communication and increased self-leadership.

Research Question 2

RQ2: How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the employee engagement within their organization? The participants within the group felt that the level of engagement within the group did not significantly change after completing the strengths identification and development program. Prior to completing the program, all but one participant felt that they were engaged with their work and their team, and there was no notable change after completing the program.

Bay did not see an increase in the amount of engagement, but rather saw a shift in the type of engagement within the team. Bay explained:

> In the level of engagement, I would say it stayed the same, but kind of the content of the engagement would kind of differ because I knew to look out for different things, depending on, like I said, where understanding, where kind of the context of some of our strengths and weaknesses comes out, then we know that, OK, well, maybe that person is a little bit more reserved.

Corey had a similar experience. He explained that his level of engagement was not impacted significantly, but rather he became more aware of his strengths and the strengths of his teammates. Similarly, Blake did not experience any change in her level of engagement after completing the program. She also did not see any notable change in the level of engagement within the team.

Bobbi, Ash, and Adrian all felt that they were engaged with their work prior to completing the strengths identification and development program. The participants also felt

engaged with their co-workers prior to completing the program. However, the participants did not experience any change in the level of engagement after completing the program.

To summarize, the participants did not see a notable change in the level of engagement within the group after completing the strengths identification and development program. The participants generally felt that they were engaged prior to completing the program. Further, the participants felt that they remained engaged after completing the strengths identification and development program and did not see any change in their level of engagement.

Research Question 3

RQ3: How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the trust within their organization? Overall, the participants did not think the StrengthsFinder had an impact on the level of trust within the group. Many of the participants felt that there was a high level of trust prior to completing the program, with no change in the level of trust within the group after completing the program. Additionally, there were two participants that felt that the level of trust within the group increased but felt that this shift was due to a co-worker leaving the Firm rather than the strengths identification and development program.

Blake did not perceive any change in the level of trust due to a positive level of trust prior to the program. The participant explained:

> [I] feel like we all have a pretty good sense of trust for one another anyway. But afterwards I would say, I don't know. I feel, I feel like it's about the same. Everybody in our firm gets along really well. So, I feel like there's really no issue in trust, you know, with the people.

Similarly, Bay felt that there was a high level of trust within the group prior to completing the program. The participant felt the group communicated well with one another, leading to a high level of trust within the group. Bay further explained that he thought that the program did not impact the level of trust within the group because the group was already trusting one another.

Corey explained that he felt the strengths identification and development program was a good interaction with the leadership of the group but did not see any impact on the level of trust within the organization. Specifically, he stated, "I would say it was a good interaction with leadership, with partners, the managers that we didn't normally have…I wouldn't say there's necessarily a change in … trust, though."

Bobbi explained that although he had issues with one specific co-worker, overall the group worked well together prior to completing the program and there was no change after completing the program. Bobbi explained:

When I did it, I didn't have very [much] trust in Casey. I had a really big problem with Casey... But everybody else I was fine with and again, you don't have to love everybody you work with, you just have to be able to keep a working relationship. We had a working relationship, and after the StrengthsFinder, I don't think anything changed…I don't think trust changed at all.

Similarly, Ash explained that she felt there was there was a level of mistrust within the group. However, Ash felt that once Casey left, everyone in the group trusted each other. When asked if the level of trust with the leadership of the group changed, Ash clarified:

That's hard to say because we at the leadership level, there was a lot of mistrust. But then, once one [team member] did leave and it was everyone trusts everyone, and we got

to a good place, but it was like one bad apple, unfortunately, and that caused a rift… and everyone else felt that.

Lastly, Adrian also felt that there was an increase in trust. However, she was not sure if this increase was due to the strengths identification and development program. Instead, she noted that she felt the increase in trust might have simply been the result of the team working together for a longer period of time.

Overall, the participants felt there was a positive level of trust within the group that was unchanged by the strengths program. Some of the participants felt that the level of trust within the group did increase. However, the primary reason for this increased level of trust was due to one of the group members leaving the Firm, or simply working together for a longer period of time.

Research Question 4

RQ4: How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the conflict within their organization? Overall, the participants felt that the strengths identification and development program did not have a significant impact on the level of conflict within the group, primarily due to a low level of conflict prior to completing the program. However, the participants felt that although there was no change in the level of conflict, the group managed the conflicts that arose more effectively after completing the program. The participants also felt that any decrease in conflict that occurred was attributable to a difficult team member leaving the organization, rather than due to the strengths identification program.

Bay stated that, prior to completing the Strengths Program, the conflict within the group seemed to become more heightened leading up to deadlines. He further explained that after

completing the Strengths Program, the conflict level seemed to be consistent, however, the

participants had more context to address the conflict with. Bay explained:

> I think I took [the conflict] with a lot more context to where I was more just reassured
>
> after the fact, like, OK, that makes sense with this individual because I know what their
>
> top five [strengths] are, whereas before it's kind of guessing or reading between the lines
>
> of emails or reading facial expressions or social cues or whether somebody has a door
>
> open, a door closed, what kind of day it is. So, I think definitely that helped improve
>
> resolving some conflicts or learning to kind of take emotion out of it and just kind of
>
> doing the work.

Similarly, Ash did not necessarily see a decrease in the level of conflict within the group.

However, she did explain that the group's approach to conflict was much more productive than

prior to completing the strengths identification and development program. Specifically, Ash

explained that the strengths identification and development program assisted the team in having

more open communication with one another which helped address the conflict that arose in a

timelier manner. Blake and Corey had similar experiences. The participants did not see any

change in the level of conflict, but rather felt that communication was more open for a period of

time after completing the strengths identification and development program.

Bobbi also did not see a significant shift in the conflict within the group after completing

the strengths identification and development program. When asked if Bobbi saw a change in the

conflict within the group after completing the program, Bobbi explained:

> Maybe for like a week. You know, how you learn it and then for a week you try to follow
>
> it, but in the back of your head, like, you can't change me, who I am... Yeah, I noticed in

the first few weeks that we talk to each other. Then after that it was just like back to

normal.

Bobbi also discussed the conflict he had with another participant. He explained that the

conflict between he and the other participants did decrease, but this was due to one team member

leaving the company, rather than the strengths program. Similarly, Adrian felt that the level of

conflict within the group was high prior to completing the program, primarily due to this one

employee, and decreased after completing the strengths program. Adrian felt that this decrease

was primarily attributable to the difficult team member leaving after the Strengths Program was

completed and improved communication within the group.

Specifically, Adrian explained:

Prior, I think there's always conflict. So, yes, I think prior to, and I don't always have

visibility at all the conflict, I think prior to it there was certainly I mean, I had conflict

with one of the managers, but I think that there was probably normal conflict between,

you know, I'd say the team members that I probably didn't have a lot of visibility to. I

think, post the program, I feel like people communicate better. And again, I don't know if

it's the program or that people are just have worked with each other for a longer amount

of time. But I do think that … when there's a conflict that it's not … ignored and just, I

don't know, like it's dealt with. So… so I think that people I mean, I think it's identified

and dealt with and, you know, there's sometimes solutions and there's sometimes not.

To summarize, overall, the participants did not see a significant change in the level of

conflict within the group due to the strengths identification and development program. Many of

the participants felt that if there was a change in the level of conflict within the group, this

change was due to a difficult group member leaving the organization, rather than attributable to

the strengths identification and development program. However, the participants did see a positive change in the way the group managed conflicts that arose within the group.

Review of Materials

In addition to performing interviews with the participants, I also collected the materials used in the strengths identification and development program. This included program materials that were discussed during the group meeting, as well as the developmental activities that were provided to participants to complete individually after the group meeting. In this section, I will describe the program materials and analyze these materials in the context of the program and this study.

Program Materials

As previously discussed, the participants completed the strengths assessment independently and then provided their results to the program leader. The leader then analyzed the results and created a variety of materials to utilize during their group discussion. The program materials included general handouts and group strength analysis handouts.

General Handouts. There were three general handouts passed out and discussed during the group meeting. The first handout, entitled "Strengths Domains," grouped the different strengths from the StrengthsFinder into five categories, or domains, as well as provided a broad description of the category. The second handout, entitled "CliftonStrengths Themes," provided a short description of each strength within the StrengthsFinder. The last general handout, entitled "Theme Combinations," provided a matrix of each strength and the strength it is most likely to appear with as well as least likely to appear with.

These handouts provided generalized information regarding all the strength areas. These materials provided additional insight to participants into their own strengths. For example, Adrian explained:

> So, I think that there's ways that I would approach things that I didn't realize that there was DNA behind it. I think… not only from the top five things, but even the bottom. There's just some things that, you know, I just I'm like, OK, that's just not me. Right? So, I think for me, the StrengthsFinder, I think it was very I think it's very insightful. I think it was… I think it almost gave me more confidence to like, oh, OK, it's OK, this is just this is me. This is where I am. And if these are my strengths, then don't be ashamed, embarrassed, or don't try to act competitive.

Group Strength Analysis Handouts. The leader of the program also provided two group strength analysis handouts during the group meeting. The first handout, untitled, included a diagram of each participating team member, a description of their leadership type, and their ranking of the 34 strengths within the StrengthsFinder. The matrix provided a color-coded comparison of each participants' strengths. The second handout, also untitled, included a comparison of each participants top 10 strengths, as well as their bottom four strengths.

These materials provided the participant's specific insight into their own strengths as well as their team members and provided a graphical understanding of how the participants fit into the group. This additional insight can be seen in the responses of the participants.

Corey explained that prior to the program, the participant had a strong understanding of their own strengths, but the program provided a clearer understanding of the strength of their peers and who might be the best resource for certain projects. Similarly, Ash explained that the

participant's communication style and assignment of projects was adjusted after the strengths program to fit with the different employees' strengths. Additionally, Bay explained:

[I] think some of us were self-aware a little bit on what we thought our strengths were. But what they were maybe classified as or the different wording, I guess, was trying to figure out, like, how it fit into there. But yeah, I think there were some things that we knew. But then … I think it's easier for extroverts to like, you know what their strengths are, is either communicating or even if they're talking too much, then it's like, are they leading or is it just sound? But either way, whereas more of like the introverts, that's where it was kind of shocking because we didn't really know what was going on in their mind or unless they were saying something like what their thoughts were or how they plan and manage because you don't hear about it.

Analysis. The materials provided to the participants provided a foundational understanding of their strength areas, as well as an overview of their individual strengths in comparison with their team members, which can be seen in the themes of the interviews discussed in this section. These materials did not provide any developmental suggestions or analysis. The program leader provided additional handouts that included developmental activities for the participants to complete on their own. However, during the interviews, all the participants in the study said they did not complete the individual developmental activities.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand, from the employee's point of view, the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through identifying strengths, on employee engagement, team member trust, and affective conflict within a dispersed team. In this chapter, I discussed the results of the interviews I completed with participants in a strengths identification

and development program. To test the validity of the themes presented in this chapter, I asked the participants to review the themes and confirm they agreed. The participants positively confirmed that the themes were consistent with their perception of the impact the strengths identification and development program had on the levels of shared leadership, employee engagement, trust, and conflict within the group. In the following chapter I will summarize the study and present my conclusions, the implications for practice, and suggest additional areas of research for future studies.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how a shared-leadership approach, implemented through identifying strengths, impacts employee engagement, team member trust, and affective conflict within a dispersed team. In this chapter, I will summarize the study and the findings that resulted. I will also provide suggestions for additional areas of study.

Summary of the Study

In this section, I will provide a brief summary of the study before summarizing and discussing the findings. First, I will provide an overview of the problem, purpose of the study, and research questions. Then, I will review the methodology of the study and discuss the major findings.

Overview of the Problem

The current leadership literature does not provide insight into the changing demands on leaders due to the shift from traditional face-to-face organizations to virtual and dispersed teams. This gap in the leadership literature has led to increased disconnection between team members of virtual teams, as well as decreased trust and increased conflict within these organizations (Hoch & Dulebohn, 2017). Traditional face-to-face organizations have found success with strength identification and developments programs (MacKie, 2014). Therefore, providing leaders within dispersed organization insight into how to increase trust and decrease conflict within their organization, through development and alignment of team member strengths with team member roles, could result in more effective leadership of virtual and dispersed organizations, as well as improved employee engagement.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

As previously stated, the purpose of this qualitative embedded single case study was to explore employee perceptions of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach, implemented through identifying strengths, on employee engagement, team member trust, and affective conflict within a dispersed organization. Specifically, in this study I explored the following research questions:

RQ1. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact and effectiveness of a strength identification and development program on developing the shared leadership within their organization?

RQ2. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the employee engagement within their organization?

RQ3. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the trust within their organization?

RQ4. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the conflict within their organization?

Review of the Methodology

I performed one-on-one, semistructured interviews with individuals who participated in a strengths identification and development program within one organization. The participants all completed an individualized positive oriented development program centered around the StrengthsFinder 2.0 assessment. All of the participants were members of the same dispersed

organization and were still employed by the organization at the time of the interview. The organization was a national public accounting firm, and all of the participants worked out of an office in the Southern United States. Additionally, the participants were primarily tax professionals working at various levels of the company.

Summary of Findings

In this section, I will discuss the findings of the study as they relate to each research question. Overall, the participants felt that there was an increase in the level of shared leadership within the group after completing the strengths identification and development program. In contrast, the participants did not see a change in level of engagement or trust within the group after completing the strengths identification and development program. Lastly, the participants did not see any change in the level of conflict within the group that they attributed to the strengths identification and development program. However, the participants felt that although there was no change in the level of conflict within the group, the team managed conflicts that arose more effectively after completing the strengths identification and development program.

Findings in Context of the Literature

It is imperative to understand these findings as they relate to prior literature. In the section below, I analyze each of the findings further in the context of the literature around each sub-topic. These areas include shared leadership, employee engagement, trust, and conflict.

Shared Leadership. As noted in the summary above, the participants in the study experienced an increase in the shared leadership within the group. The participants felt that this increase in shared leadership was primarily due to improved communication and understanding of co-workers through recognition of strengths. Researchers have emphasized that in order for team members to effectively share leadership, they must first understand and respect the

competencies of their team members (Chiu et al., 2016). Specifically. individuals must perceive

each other as legitimate leaders (Norbach & Espinosa, 2019) and understand where their

individual competencies fit within the team (van Zyl & Hofmeyr, 2021). In this study, the

strengths identification and development program provided a means for individuals to not only

understand their own strengths, but also to recognize and respond to the strengths of their

teammates. In particular, the cross-analysis of all the participants' strengths together provided

this needed insight into not only the employees' own competencies, but the strengths of their

teammates as well. Additionally, the group discussion after completing the assessments provided

a means for the group to further discuss the results of their assessments and the correlation to

their leadership competencies, as well as recognize the strengths of their team members and the

related leadership competencies.

It is also of note that the participants in the study felt that increased communication led to

an increase in shared leadership within the group. Recently, van Zyl and Hofmeyr (2021) found

that informal exchanges between group members builds relationships within the group, increases

connectedness within the group, and supports ongoing communication between group members.

In this study, the strengths identification and development program, including the group

discussion, provided an informal setting for the participants to grow together as a team.

Additionally, Han and Hazard (2022) emphasized the importance of developing effective

communication strategies in virtual and dispersed teams. As previously discussed, dispersed

organizations can face additional complexities due to the separation and required trust among

team members. However, Han and Hazard (2022) pointed out that developing effective

communication practices can decrease misunderstandings and increase team bonding. Therefore,

the participants view that increased communication led to increased shared leadership within the

group after completing the strengths identification and development program is consistent with the current literature.

Employee Engagement. The participants in the study did not experience any change in their level of engagement, both with their work and interpersonally, after completing the strengths identification and development program. Researchers have found that employees engage and withdraw from organizations due to three conditions within an organization, which include meaningfulness, safety, and availability (Kahn, 1990). Recently, Han et al. (2021) examined the relationship between meaningfulness and work engagement, as well as in-role performance and job characteristics. The authors found that meaningful work is positively associated with engagement and job performance, and further suggested that managers should consider increasing meaningfulness for employees through various interventions, including by enhancing employees' work-role-fit. Similarly, researchers have proposed that one way programs such as the strengths identification and development program reviewed in this study can impact employee engagement is through encouraging employees to "job craft" or modify their role in an organization based on their observations from the strengths identification and development program (Kuijpers et al., 2019). This modification is then thought to result in an increased feeling of autonomy, thereby increasing the employee's feeling of psychological safety. Additionally, Ryan and Deci (2017) pointed out that when individuals experience autonomy support, they have increased feelings of competence and relatedness.

Previously, researchers have pointed out that awareness of strengths does not always lead to increased use of strengths within a team (MacKie, 2016). In line with this point, all but one of the participants in the strengths identification and development program in this study indicated that they did not make any changes to their role or tasks within the organization based on their

identified strengths after completing the program. Researchers have previously found that it is not simply the identification of strengths that is important, but rather the use of the identified strengths (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2018) and supervisor support of strengths use within an organization (Matsuo, 2022) that leads to increased engagement. Additionally, Pelaez et al. (2019) found that employees who participated in a strengths-based intervention and short-term coaching program did not experience statistically significant increases in engagement over a period of time. The authors hypothesized that this lack of significant increase could have been the lack of follow-up after coaching was initially completed. Similarly, the participants in this study did not complete any of the individual development activities that were provided and did not participate in additional coaching or discussions with the program leader after the initial group meeting. Therefore, the results of this study could indicate that the lack of changes made to the employees' roles within the organization after completing the strengths identification and development program, as well as the lack of continued coaching and strengths-use encouragement could have contributed to the lack of change in the level of employee engagement within the organization after completing the program.

Trust. Similar to the area of employee engagement, the participants in the study did not experience any change in the level of trust within the group after completing the strengths identification and development program. In the past, researchers have agreed that building trust within an organization should be a top priority (Ford et al., 2017; Lilian, 2014; Savolainen, 2014), but have failed to reach a consensus as to the most effective trust building approach (Ford et al., 2017; Hoegl & Muethel, 2016). As previously highlighted, approaches to build trust within organizations range from autonomously motivated to controlled motivation approaches. The program at the center of this study focused on identifying and bringing awareness to team

members' strengths with a goal of providing an increased self-awareness to team members of their strengths and how they contribute to the organization and its needs. This approach is considered an autonomously motivated approach.

Drescher et al. (2014) found that increased shared leadership leads to increased trust. While this study found the strengths identification and development program led to increased shared leadership within the group, the group did not experience this benefit of increased trust. However, it is important to note that Drescher et al. (2014) found that increased trust occurred over time. This could indicate why the team did not experience increased trust, and it should be considered that although the team did not experience an immediate increase in trust, the group could show increased trust as they continue to work together and share leadership.

Alternatively, various researchers have found that trust is an antecedent to shared leadership, rather than shared leadership leading to increased trust. Lyndon et al. (2020) found that team members that trust each other are more willing to share leadership responsibilities. Similarly, Castellano et al. (2021) and Klasmeier and Rowold (2020) discovered that trust is necessary in order for team members to share leadership responsibilities. Castellano et al. (2021) proposed that trust amongst team members supports a change from self-leadership to shared leadership by aligning team members' individual goals with the shared vision of the group. This alternative view could explain the outcome seen within this study. The steady level of trust within the group could have led the team members to an increased level of shared leadership as communication within the group improved and members became more aware of their strengths and position within the group.

Conflict. The participants in the study indicated that there was not a significant change in the level of conflict within the group after completing the strengths identification and

development program. However, the participants did express that they felt conflict within the group was handled more effectively after completing the program. As previously discussed, researchers have found that a common issue leading to conflict within organizations is power struggles among leaders of a group. Aime et al. (2014) stated that organizations that allow leadership to be shared amongst team members can be beneficial. However, in order for shared leadership to work effectively within a group, team members have to recognize the strengths and abilities of the co-workers.

Similarly, Sinha et al. (2021) hypothesized and confirmed that the presence of one positive condition, such as shared leadership, does not always result in positive relational outcomes, such as decreased conflict. Instead, the authors found that relationship conflict decreased when those sharing leadership have some means to differentiate the power level amongst each other as they share leadership within the team. In this study, the strengths identification and development program at the center of this study provided a means for the team members to differentiate the power amongst the leaders through recognizing their strengths and the strengths of their teammates. This increased insight into the strengths of team members and increased understanding of the power dynamics within the team could have led to the more effective management of conflict within the organization.

Alternatively, recent research has emphasized the importance of considering both the leadership and followership dynamics within an organization. Baird and Benson (2022) found that in addition to effective leadership, team members must practice effective followership in order for a team to function properly. The current study did not consider the followership within the organization prior to or after completing the strengths identification and development program. An ineffective followership culture could be an alternative explanation for the

sustained level of conflict within the group, as well as providing an additional area of research to consider.

It is important to note that researchers have emphasized conflict itself is not always detrimental to organizations, but rather the ineffective management of conflict (O'Neill & Allen, 2014). Therefore, it should not necessarily be concerning that the participants continue to see conflict amongst the group.

Recommendation for Future Research

The findings in this study indicate that teams do benefit from strengths identification and development programs, including increased shared leadership and improved conflict management. However, based on the literature and the findings within this study, it is also presumable that additional benefit might result from follow-up coaching and continued encouragement in development of strengths. Below are four additional areas that could be considered for future studies:

1. A longitudinal study could be completed on a dispersed organization that has implemented a strengths identification program that includes continuous structured coaching and role crafting based on the identified strengths. As discussed above, researchers have indicated that job crafting towards strengths has previously resulted in positive outcomes within organizations. It could be beneficial to add this additional step to a strengths identification and development program such as the one in this study.

2. A longitudinal study could be completed on a dispersed organization that has implemented a strengths program. As discussed above, there is evidence in the literature that would suggest that certain benefits from the strengths identification and development program, such as trust, could increase over time.

3. A similar study could be completed using a different strengths identification assessment. The strengths identification and development program at the center of this study utilized the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment and coaching methodology. The results of the study might differ if a different strengths assessment was used.

4. A similar study could be completed using the same strengths identification assessment but include considerations of both leadership and followership culture. As noted above, the followership culture might impact the resulting level of conflict, as well as other aspects of the organization.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore employee perceptions of the impact and effectiveness of a shared leadership approach, implemented through identifying strengths, on employee engagement, team member trust, and affective conflict within a dispersed organization. Roche and Hefferon (2013) posed the question of whether it was beneficial to complete strengths assessments without follow-up coaching. The results of this study indicate that although completing a strengths identification and development program such as the program at the center of the study can improve the shared leadership within a group, as well as provide more effective conflict resolution, continued development opportunities and coaching may be necessary to provide significant improvement in other areas, such as employee engagement and trust. The participants in this study were provided additional development opportunities during the program but were not followed up with nor encouraged to complete the take-home development materials. The findings within the study are in-line with much of the research around strengths identification programs, which have emphasized that simply identifying strengths is not enough.

Strength identification assessments continue to be very popular, both within organizations as well as in a personal setting. Unfortunately, many organizations fail to effectively debrief participants and utilize the results of the strength assessments. Roche and Hefferon (2013) emphasized that although a strengths assessment is a good starting point, discussing and understanding the results of the strengths assessment is crucial and increases the participant's ability to continue developing and using their identified strength areas. In order to see real change from strength assessments, organizations must work to encourage employees to utilize their strengths as well as be open to helping employees shape their roles within organizations to match their developing strengths.

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Appendix A: Participant Contact Email

Good afternoon,

I am conducting my doctoral dissertation research with Abilene Christian University. I am researching the experiences and perceptions of employees working remotely from one another who have participated in a strengths development program, such as the Clifton Strengths-Finder.

Should you choose to participate in this study, the risk is minimal. Your personal identifying information, including your name and the name of your organization, will not be shared with anyone, and every effort to maintain your confidentiality will be made, as further discussed in the attached consent form.

To complete the study, I will be conducting one-on-one interviews via video conferencing or by telephone. The interview will last approximately one hour, and will be scheduled at a convenient time for you. At the completion of the interviews, I will also ask you to review a summary of the responses to ensure they are consistent with your experiences.

There is no obligation for you to participate. If you do choose to participate, in both the interview and summary review, you will receive a $10 Starbucks gift card. Your participation in this study would be greatly appreciated and will contribute to the vast research that is currently being conducted on dispersed organizations.

Kind regards,

Tracie Shutt

EdD Candidate

Abilene Christian University

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Research Questions:

  RQ1. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact and effectiveness of a strength identification and development program on developing the shared leadership within their organization?

  RQ2. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the employee engagement within their organization?

  RQ3. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the trust within their organization?

  RQ4. How do employees within a dispersed organization perceive the impact of a shared-leadership approach, implemented through a strength identification and development program, on the conflict within their organization?

Interview Questions:

General Questions
1. Please tell me your title and give me a brief description of your role in the company.
2. How long have you been with the organization?
3. What kind of work did you do before joining this organization?

Study Questions (combined concepts):
1. Describe for me the leadership structure within your organization <u>prior</u> to completing the strengths program.
   a. **Probe** - Was there one primary person responsible for the bulk of the leadership responsibilities, or were the responsibilities shared amongst team members? [Shared leadership]
   b. **Probe** - How did this leadership structure make you feel about your work and your role in the company? [Employee engagement, conflict, trust, connectedness, competency, autonomy]
2. Describe for me the leadership structure within your organization <u>after</u> completing the strengths program.
   a. **Probe** - Was there one primary person responsible for the bulk of the leadership responsibilities, or were the responsibilities shared amongst team members? [Shared leadership]
   b. **Probe** - If there was a change,
      i. Describe for me your perception of the impact the strengths program had on this change. [Shared leadership, strengths leadership]
      ii. How do you feel about your work and your role in the company after this shift in leadership structure? [Employee engagement, conflict, trust, connectedness, competency, autonomy]
3. Can you describe for me, prior to the strengths program, your understanding of your strengths and the strengths of your teammates? [Strengths leadership, shared leadership]
   a. **Probe** - Were there team members that everyone recognized as being particularly strong in certain areas of the business? [Strengths leadership, shared leadership]

b. Did this understanding shift after completing the strengths program? [Strengths leadership, shared leadership]
    i. **Probe** - Did your relationship with your co-workers change at all because of any insight you gained during the strengths program? [Strengths leadership, shared leadership, connectedness, competency, conflict, trust]
    ii. **Probe** - Were any changes made to roles and responsibilities based on any insight gained during the strengths program? [Strengths leadership, shared leadership, competency, connectedness, trust]

Employee Engagement

1. How would you describe your overall level of engagement interpersonally with your team members prior to completing the strengths program? [Employee engagement]
   a. What about your overall level of engagement with your work and the projects you were assigned to?
2. How would you describe the overall engagement of your team members interpersonally as a group prior to completing the strengths program? [Employee engagement]
   a. What about their engagement with their work and the projects they are assigned to?
3. Describe for me your level of engagement interpersonally with your team members after completing the strengths program. [Employee engagement]
   a. What about your overall level of engagement with your work and the projects you are assigned to?
4. Describe for me how you perceived the level of engagement among your team members interpersonally as a group after completing the strengths program. [Employee engagement]
   a. What about their engagement with their work and the projects they are assigned to?
5. **Probe** - If there was a shift in the engagement level, describe for me the impact if any you think the strengths program had on this shift. [Employee engagement]
   a. **Probe –** Was there anything else that you think might have driven this change?

Trust

1. Describe for me your view of the level of trust among team members within the organization prior to completing the strengths program. [Trust]
   a. **Probe –** Describe your view of the level of trust that team members were capable of completing their work.
   b. **Probe –** Describe your view of the level of trust in the leadership of your organization.
2. How would you describe the trust among team members within the organization after completing the strengths program? [Trust]
   a. **Probe –** The level of trust that team members were capable of completing their work?
   b. **Probe –** The level of trust in the leadership of your organization?
3. Describe for me the impact you think the strengths program had on the level of trust amongst your team members. [Trust]
   a. **Probe –** Was there anything else that you think might have driven this change?

4. **Probe** - Did this program give you any additional insight into the strengths and competencies of your team members? [Strengths]
    a. Did that insight impact the level of trust that you had in your team members? [Trust]

Conflict
1. How would you describe the conflict amongst team members within the organization prior to completing the strengths program? What were some common areas of conflict? [Conflict]
    a. **Probe** – What about conflict with the leadership of your organization?
2. How would you describe the conflict amongst team members within the organization after completing the strengths program? What were some common areas of conflict? [Conflict]
    a. **Probe** – What about conflict with the leadership of your organization?
3. **Probe** - Did you notice any change to type or tone of the conflict that occurred after completing the strengths program? [Conflict, Connectedness]
4. **Probe** - Did you notice any change in your relationship or interactions with you team members after completing the strengths program? [Conflict, Connectedness]
5. Describe for me the impact, if any, you think the strengths program had on the conflict that occurred within your team, such as different types of conflict or frequency. [Conflict]
    a. Was there anything else that you think might have driven this change?

Closing questions
1. How has working 100% remotely impacted your work?
    a. **Probe** - Have you experienced any changes in the amount or type of conflict that has been occurring with your co-workers? [Conflict, connectedness]
    b. **Probe** - Have there been any changes in the level of trust you have with your co-workers? [Trust, conflict, connectedness]
    c. **Probe** - Do you feel like the strengths program and the insight you gained into the strengths of your co-workers has helped you in the transition to 100% virtual work? [Strengths leadership]
2. You completed the strengths program with your teammates. After the group session, did you work one-on-one with the strengths coach, with any of your team members, or by yourself to further develop your strengths? [Strengths leadership]
3. Did you make any changes to your daily work or team based on the results of the strengths program? [Strengths leadership]
4. Did you complete any of the additional worksheets that were passed out during the coaching session? [Strengths leadership]
    a. If so, would you mind sharing them with me?
    b. Did you feel like these additional exercises were beneficial?
    c. If you chose not to complete them, what drove this decision?

Appendix C: Interview Consent Form

> **Introduction:** An Examination of Conflict Resolution in Dispersed Organizations Using Strength-based Leadership

You may be able to take part in a research study. This form provides important information about that study, including the risks and benefits to you as a potential participant. Please read this form carefully and ask the researcher any questions that you may have about the study. You can ask about research activities and any risks or benefits you may experience. You may also wish to discuss your participation with other people, such as your family doctor or a family member.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or stop your participation at any time and for any reason without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION: The purpose of this study is to determine the effectiveness of a strengths identification and development program, such as the Clifton StrengthsFinder 2.0, on the shared leadership within an organization where individuals work remotely from one another. This study will focus on the impact, if any, a strengths identification and development program has on the employee engagement, conflict, and trust present within the organization.

If selected for participation, you will be asked to attend one visit with the researcher over the course of one day. During the course of this visit, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one video conference or telephonic interview with the lead researcher. This interview will last for approximately one hour, and if you consent, will be recorded. Once the interview data has been compiled and synthesized, you will be asked to review, via e-mail, the themes from the data to ensure you agree these themes accurately reflect your experiences.

RISKS & BENEFITS: There are risks to taking part in this research study. Below is a list of the foreseeable risks, including the seriousness of those risks and how likely they are to occur:

- In rare instances, you may face psychological distress by discussing any relational issues that exist within your organization. If this occurs, you are free to stop the interview, and if you desire, withdraw from the study.
- In all studies such as this one there is a risk of breach of confidentiality. Various steps will be taken throughout the study to protect your private information, as discussed in the "Privacy and Confidentiality" section below.

You may not experience any personal benefits from participating in this study.

PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY: Any information you provide will be confidential to the extent allowable by law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the ACU Institutional Review Board. Otherwise, your confidentiality will be protected. Various steps will be taken to protect your privacy. First, no identifiable information will be used in the published study, including your name or the name of the organization you work for. Secondly, each participant will be assigned a pseudonym which will be used throughout the study. Any documentation with identifiable information, including the cross-reference table containing your name and pseudonym,

will be saved in a password protected file on the researcher's personal computer or stored in a locked cabinet within the researcher's home. Only the researcher, the faculty advisor, and the Institutional Review Board will have access to this information.

CONTACTS: If you have questions about the research study, the lead researcher is Tracie Shutt and may be contacted at ███████████ or ███████████ If you are unable to reach the lead researcher, or wish to speak to someone other than the lead researcher, you may contact Dr. Donna Smith at ███████████ If you have concerns about this study, believe you may have been injured because of this study, or have general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU's Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Executive Director of Research, Megan Roth, Ph.D. Dr. Roth may be reached at

███████████████

Additional Information

Each participant in the study will be provided a $10 Starbucks gift card at the completion of their interview. If you withdraw from the study prior to completion, no compensation will be provided.

Consent Signature Section

Please electronically sign this form if you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Sign only after you have read all of the information provided and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You should receive a copy of this signed consent form. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

_____   _____   _____

Printed Name of Participant   Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____   _____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining   Signature of Person Obtaining   Date
Consent   Consent

Appendix D: IRB Approval

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

February 26, 2021

Tracie Shutt
Department of Graduate and Professional Studies
Abilene Christian University

Dear Tracie,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "An Examination of Conflict Resolution in Dispersed Organizations Using Strength-based Leadership",

(IRB# 21-018   )is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs