

**Exploring Leadership Styles and How They Impact a Lean Culture**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to explore how leadership styles affect a positive Lean culture and define a positive Lean culture. The results of this research will assist Lean practitioners as they play an integral part in creating a positive Lean culture. Creating and then fostering a positive Lean culture is valuable to leaders by improving innovation, working relationships and improved employee engagement. Learning more about how leadership styles impact a Lean culture will help future leaders create and foster a positive Lean culture.

*Keywords: Lean, positive Lean culture, Employee engagement, organizational behavior, leadership styles, growth and fixed mindsets, emotional intelligence, volunteers, communication, change, and generations*

### **Exploring Leadership Styles and How They Impact a Lean Culture**

The researcher for this qualitative study is a Master Lean Black Belt at the University System of New Hampshire, a retired New Hampshire State Trooper, and a United States Marine Corps Veteran. The purpose of this study is to explore how leadership styles affect a positive Lean Culture and to define a positive Lean culture. The researcher anticipates that the results of this study will identify benefits to an organization that creates and fosters a positive Lean culture.

The outcomes of this research will directly influence this researcher as training plans for Lean training, engagements with teams and leaders, will be adjusted to correlate with the findings. This researcher has not had the opportunity to research, analyze, and make recommendations; however, this research has provided that focus time.

This qualitative study identifies information leaders and Lean practitioners deem as vital when creating a positive Lean culture. This research utilizes leadership theories discussed by the literature and if a leader should focus on employee engagement rather than the leadership style utilized. Research exists indicating that employee engagement can be associated with organizational outcomes, positive job attitudes, job satisfaction, and organizational behavior (Saks & Gruman, 2014).

### **Literature Review**

The literature reviewed for this study is to explore how leadership styles affect a positive Lean Culture. To answer the research question, the literature was reviewed to identify relevant past research results, cover key concepts, and theoretical findings of a positive Lean culture. The researcher anticipates the results of this proposed study will identify the benefits of organizations that have created positive Lean cultures. The results of this research will assist Lean practitioners

to identify if leadership styles or employee engagement are best in their organization when creating a positive Lean culture. This literature review will explore the role leadership has in creating and fostering a positive Lean culture. A Lean culture is not possible without engaged employees. The literature review will determine if it is more important for a leader to consider employee engagement than the leadership style utilized.

This literature reviews and identifies common themes in a positive Lean culture: Employee engagement, organizational behavior, leadership styles, growth and fixed mindsets, and emotional intelligence.

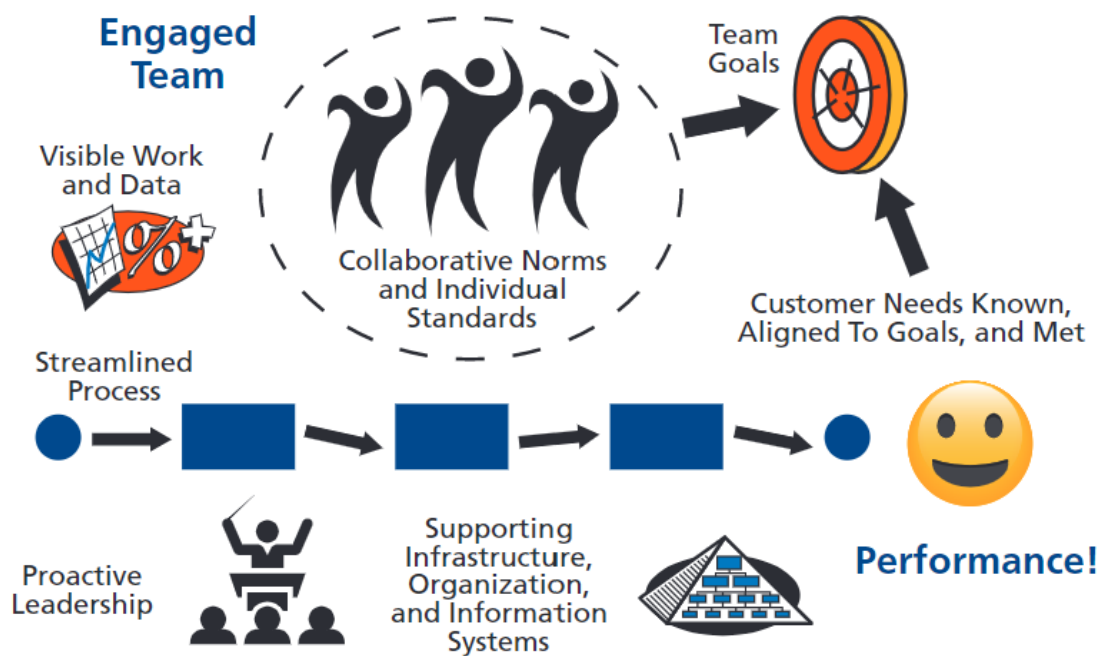
### **Definition of Lean**

Lean, according to Rich et al. (2006) is a powerful method an organization can utilize to improve the productivity, efficiency, and quality of the organization's products and services. Lean is described by van Assen (2021) as a collection of practices used together to obtain operational excellence. Lean is a methodology to empower employees to look for and remove waste. In my research I will use this definition: "Lean is a collection of management techniques aimed at increasing efficiency and effectiveness via waste elimination. Lean's fundamental concept is to minimize and eliminate non-value-added operations and waste" (Rungruengkultorn & Boonsiri (2022)).

### **The Positive Lean Culture**

Positive Lean cultures are environments where employees feel valued and empowered to solve problems innovatively. Culture is a living thing, it is a way of completing tasks, and how an organization's values are communicated and understood (Veyera, 2020). Starbird (2016) indicates, a positive Lean culture is one where employees can thrive, collaborate, adapt, and inspire passion to eliminate waste. Ratna (2022) indicates a positive Lean culture doesn't happen

overnight it is created with time. A positive culture is an upstream effect of an organization's goals, and strategy, creating a team atmosphere (Veyera, 2022). Communication must be understood and lived by every employee to create a positive culture (Veyera, 2020). Employees promote sustainability and ways to reduce waste by developing innovative ideas, creating collaborative norms and standards. Starbird (2016) illustrates one potential positive Lean culture model of engaged team performance.



**Figure 24** A Lean Culture of Engaged Team Performance.

(Starbird, 2016, p.120)

Positive Lean cultures increase employees' passion, commitment, and engagement (Angelis, et al., 2011). A positive Lean culture is an environment where innovative ideas are encouraged and welcomed by leadership to create engaged employees.

## **Employee Engagement**

Employee engagement is a core value of Lean which is to empower employees to identify and participate in improvement opportunities to eliminate waste (Angelis, et al., 2011).

Employee engagement is defined by the level of passion, commitment, and drive employees have. When determining employee engagement, one needs to look for signs. According to Canavesi & Minelli (2021),

Employee engagement refers to a series of positive attitudes displayed by employees, such as passion for their work and organization, commitment, and contribution to organizational success. Human capital represents one of the most important assets in an organization, leaders are challenged to identify those drivers that can either increase or decrease engagement. When employees are engaged, they become ... more emotionally involved, loyal and productive, thus providing better customer service experiences, particularly in services-oriented firms. (p.415)

Employee engagement is not only a leadership responsibility it is every employee's responsibility (Peters, 2019). To be successful Lean needs to involve every employee at all levels. Peters (2019) illustrates one potential positive Lean culture model of employee engagement.





*Figure 4: Model for Employee Engagement*

(Peters, 2019, p.26).

Employees who are committed and engaged understand how they fit in an organization and the behavior needed to react to change. Employee engagement can be influenced by leadership support or lack thereof.

### **Leadership Styles**

Leaders need to be human, be in touch with employees, and be empathetic (Luthan, 2015) There is a difference between leaders and managers Luthans (2015) illustrates the differences between a leader and manager.

**TABLE 13.1. Some Characteristics of Managers Versus Leaders in the Twenty-First Century**

Manager Characteristics	Leader Characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administers</li> <li>• A copy</li> <li>• Maintains</li> <li>• Focuses on systems and structure</li> <li>• Relies on control</li> <li>• Short-range view</li> <li>• Asks how and when</li> <li>• Eye on the bottom line</li> <li>• Imitates</li> <li>• Accepts the status quo</li> <li>• Classic good soldier</li> <li>• Does things right</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovates</li> <li>• An original</li> <li>• Develops</li> <li>• Focuses on people</li> <li>• Inspires trust</li> <li>• Long-range perspective</li> <li>• Asks what and why</li> <li>• Eye on the horizon</li> <li>• Originates</li> <li>• Challenges the status quo</li> <li>• Own person</li> <li>• Does the right thing</li> </ul>

(Luthan, 2015, p.377)

This research will focus on a few leadership styles as they are often utilized in a Lean culture: Transformational Leadership, Authentic Leadership, Servant Leadership, and Adaptive Leadership.

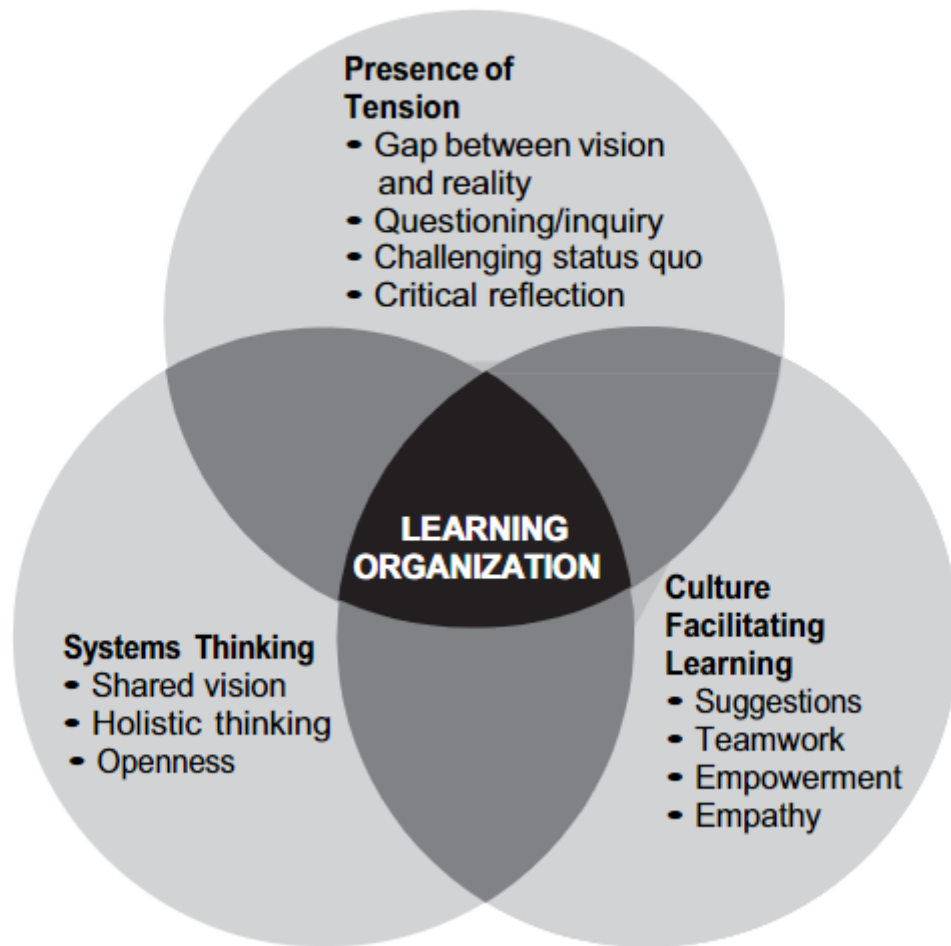
Transformational Leadership influences, inspires, and creates a learning climate (Ghasabeh et al., 2015). According to Northouse (2019) Transformational Leadership is,

The process whereby a person engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower. This type of leader is attentive to the needs and motives of followers and tries to help followers reach their fullest potential. (p.164).

Dynamic employees are the heart and soul of an organization and when there is a lack of organizational support it can negatively affect employee commitment (Angelis, et al., 2011). Leaders must discover employees' abilities, strengths, weaknesses, and motivation (Skopak & Hadzaihmetovic, 2022). A transformational leader does not look at failure, as a failure, it is a learning opportunity. Learning at all levels is critical in a Lean culture, and must be continuous

and evolving. Luthans (2015) illustrates one potential model for the characteristics of a learning organization.

## Characteristics of Learning Organizations



(Luthans, 2015, p.47)

Transformational leaders create a safe environment for communication and honesty as do Authentic leaders.

Authentic Leadership creates an environment where innovation and solving problems are the norm (Gardner et al., 2021) these are skills intrinsic to a Lean culture. Authentic Leadership is defined by Muguna (2022) as,

Authentic leadership goes beyond exercising power and authority to merge actions, words, and thoughts carefully. One does not become an authentic leader in an instant; rather, over time (p.337).

Authentic leaders lead fairly, while creating positive self-development with their followers, which creates trust (Ghufran et al., 2022).

Servant leadership is a leadership style often used in a Lean culture. Canavesi & Minelli (2021) describe Servant Leadership as,

A holistic approach whereby leaders act with morality, showing great concern for the company's stakeholders and engaging followers in multiple dimensions, such as emotional, relational, and ethical, to bring out their full potential and empower them to grow into what they can become (p.414).

Servant leadership, like the other leadership styles examined in this literature review fosters a Lean culture of honest feedback which is necessary for constant improvement. Honesty is a trait that Servant leaders possess. Servant leaders focus on their follower's interest, they treat followers fairly and build trust based on social exchanges (Febrianti & Yulian. 2022).

Lean cultures rely on a leader's ability to treat employees fairly while empowering employees to solve problems, Adaptive leaders do that. According to Northouse (2019), Adaptive Leadership is defined as, "Adaptive Leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive". (p.258). There are times when a decision needs to be made

quickly. Adaptive leaders can solve problems quickly, navigate or manage ambiguity, consistently learn, and handle stress (London (2023)).

Luthans (2015), indicates Lean cultures thrive on leaders who support and collaborate with employees and constantly seek to improve and have a growth mindset.

### **Growth Mindset versus Fixed Mindset**

Mindset is a term defined by Dweck (2009) as a set of beliefs as to how individuals face the world. Individuals who consistently look to improve and learn have a growth mindset, while those that are afraid of failure and avoid challenges have a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2016).

According to Rammstedt, Gruning & Lechner (2022), the belief that your ability and intelligence can develop over time is considered a growth mindset. The belief that you are born with a certain ability and intelligence which cannot improve over time is considered a fixed mindset according to Rammstedt, Gruning & Lechner (2022).

There are clear differences between a growth and fixed mindset in the way people respond to challenges. Wilson & Conyers (2020), describe people with a growth mindset face challenges head-on while people with a fixed mindset avoid challenges all together. Lean cultures require individuals with a growth mindset, those who focus on improvement and growth rather than the status quo. Wilson & Conyers (2020), illustrates a few of the differences between a growth and a fixed mindset.

<b>FIGURE 1.1 Growth Mindset Versus Fixed Mindset</b>		
<b>Contexts</b>	<b>Growth Mindset</b>	<b>Fixed Mindset</b>
<i>Challenges</i>	Faces challenges	Avoids challenges
<i>Obstacles</i>	Keeps going when the going gets tough	Gives up easily and becomes defensive
<i>Effort</i>	Sees effort as essential for achieving mastery	Sees effort as pointless
<i>Criticism</i>	Actively learns from negative but useful feedback	Ignores negative but useful feedback
<i>Success of others</i>	Learns from and is inspired by the success of others	Is threatened by the success of others

(Wilson & Conyers, 2020, p.15)

A Growth Mindset and team effort are described by Beckman (2020) as,

When a company commits to a continuous improvement plan, it becomes a way of life and new culture. Dedication to constant improvement is a mindset that becomes programmed in all members of management, as well as machine operators and the rest of the staff. As with any company goal, the chances of success are higher when employees from multiple levels are involved and on board with the process. (p.27)

A growth mindset is challenging work; however, indicated by Dweck (2016), individuals who practice a growth mindset have a sense of who they are, where they want to go, and how to get there. An individual's growth mindset reflects one's emotional intelligence and the ability to grow and improve over time.

## Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is one's ability to perceive, trigger, and regulate emotions (Gransberry, 2021). An effective leader is improving their emotional intelligence consistently. Purushothaman (2021), illustrates two options for a leader.

### Option A

- Can solve mathematical problems
- Scored high marks in school
- Solve crossword puzzle
- Can remember facts and figures
- Can analyse a problem
- Has a good range of vocabulary
- Can speak multiple languages
- Has a good handwriting
- Can remember quotes and narrate them

### Option B

- Tries to understand you
- Listens with intent
- Influences you positively when feeling low
- Takes responsibility when the chips are down
- Is calm in crisis situations
- Coaches and mentors
- Empathizes well
- Communicates clearly
- Knows when to say what

(Purushothaman, 2021, p.21)

Purushothaman (2021), indicates most employees choose the leader in option B; however, organizations train their leaders to be option A. According to Gransberry (2021),

A leader must be aware of their weaknesses and strengths and recognize how their emotions affect them and overall team performance. Emotional intelligence requires self-management, which enables the leader to manage their emotions in adverse conditions and retain a positive attitude amidst setbacks. The emotionally intelligent leader displays social awareness competencies marked by the ability to identify with others' emotions, demonstrate empathy and determine how to communicate with their employees

appropriately. The implication is that emotional intelligence allows a leader to understand the critical relationship management dynamics that enhance their ability to create a receptive work atmosphere. (p. 939).

According to Zysberg (2015), organizations that invest in developing the emotional and social intelligence of their employees are more successful than those that don't. A leader's ability to use their emotional and social intelligence determines the success of an organization (Zysberg, 2015). Lanthem (2021) writes,

EI has been linked to such factors as work relations, leadership styles, work attitudes, health and stress at work, teamwork, performance, the likelihood of promotion, and life-work balance, among others. Associations between EI and the above factors have proven relevant for recruitment experts, staff trainers and generalists and human resource managers, many of whom have included them in their human capital management policies. (p.136).

Emotional intelligent leaders connect with their volunteers and create a sense of inclusion. Volunteers feel they have a voice and a purpose.

## **Volunteers**

Volunteers play an integral part in a Lean culture. Lean practitioners possess an improvement mindset and take the first step in their Lean journey on their own. Lean cultures rely on volunteers to be successful, because organizations only have a limited number of full time improvement positions available.. These volunteers continuously want to improve and look for ways to become more effective and efficient. Volunteer commitment ties back to feeling a sense of belonging, which leads volunteer to retention (Angelis, et al., 2011). "Volunteering is



when a person freely chooses to spend his or her time – unpaid – supporting a needy group or individual. A volunteer’s goal is to have a meaningful, measurable impact” (Rosenthal, 2015). According to Hu (2021) volunteers are most likely to choose an organization who shares their same values. Belonging is what Lehner, Mattes, van Breugel, Reeger & Scholten (2021) indicate volunteers are looking for,

Belonging can emerge at distinct locations and levels, and it is strongly tied to feeling at home with people. Belonging is thus more social than spatial. Volunteering organizations are a prominent place where such connections are developed, but again, they are not unique. (p. 771).

Volunteer’s sense of belonging and their motivation factors vary depending on their generation and beliefs.

## **Generations**

There are differences in each generation’s work values and motivation according to Van Rossem (2019). A concern facing leadership today is the many generations in the workforce and the motivation and values each generation has. Van Rossem (2018) writes,

“Generation as birth cohorts” is a large part of generational research, or theory that claims those belonging to the same birth cohort gives individuals a common location in the social and historical process and therefore limits them to a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them for a certain characteristic model of thought and experienced a characteristic type of historically relevant action. However, not all people growing up during a particular period are influenced in the same way by those historical

and social events. These value systems then influence every aspect of a person's life, including how people behave in the workplace (p. 435).

Building trust among each of the generation's workforce is critical for leaders. Leaders can build trust over time by being truthful, communicating effectively, employing consistency/standardization, and caring for their team (Bottomley & Burgess, 2018). To effectively deliver their message Lean leader's communications adjusts to their audience.

**Communication and Influencing Change**

Ineffective communication increases mistakes, the possibility of missed deadlines, and impacts trust (Fulkerson et al., 2015). Good communication is necessary in project teams, where leaders recognize employees talents (Fulkerson et al., 2015). Veyera (2020) illustrates a cultural readiness exercise to be utilized with Lean cultures,

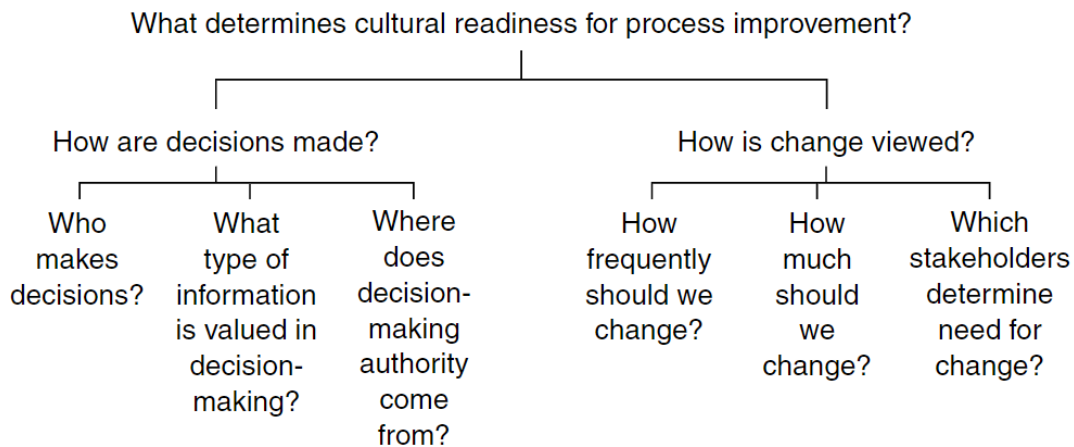


FIGURE 6. Cultural dimensions tree diagram

(Veyera, 2020, p.10).

## **Conclusion**

Organizational Leaders in a Lean culture must be willing to embrace change to best serve their employees, customers, and stakeholders (Chinoperekweyi et al., 2022). Leaders must adjust, adapt, and continuously learn. A growth mindset keeps organizational leaders moving forward to stay competitive (Chinoperekweyi et al., 2022). Employee engagement is vital to a Lean culture by empowering employees to participate in improvement opportunities (Angelis, et al., 2011).

Open and honest communication is crucial in a positive Lean culture to create employee satisfaction. Leaders can celebrate big and small wins publicly which improves employees engagement, loyalty, and productivity (Canavesi & Minelli, 2021). Continued open communication has been a successful way to foster a Lean culture with leadership support.

This paper's results are based on reviewing academic literature, and studies while comparing what the results were to determine future research. The limitations of this research are the depth and breadth of organizations across multiple industries. Lean is being utilized in more than just manufacturing settings and future research could be conducted to see if industries such as higher education, state government, health care, etc. have the same outcomes.

## **Discussion and Analysis**

This paper involved analyzing qualitative and quantitative data obtained through peer-reviewed articles, journals, and published material by industry professionals. The Granite State and the University of New Hampshire library were the main locations the information was obtained. The methods used to acquire relevant material were by searching keywords: Lean, positive Lean culture, Employee engagement, organizational behavior, leadership styles, growth

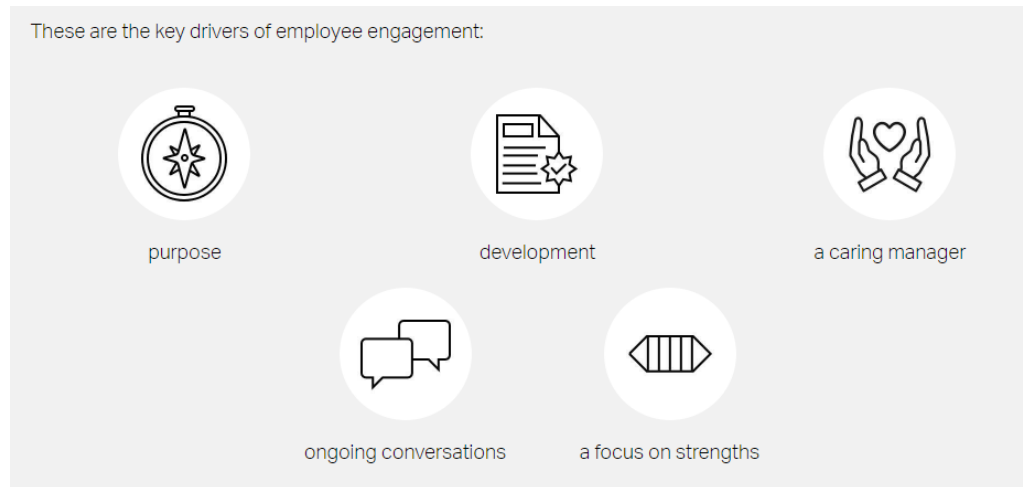
and fixed mindsets, emotional intelligence, volunteers, communication, change, and generations. This information can be used by leaders and Lean practitioners looking to create and foster a positive Lean Culture.

### **Data**

In reviewing the literature related to my interests, I crafted the following question, is engagement from a leader just as important as the leadership styles utilized? The academic literature and research that was reviewed indicate that a positive Lean culture is created and fostered by organizations that lead inclusively, empower employees, have open lines of communication, and drive out fear that when processes are improved employees won't lose their jobs. Gallup finds that 70% of the variance in a team's engagement is directly influenced by leaders (Gallup, 2023). A survey conducted by (Gallup 2023): indicates that effective leaders focus less on what leadership style they utilize and more on,

- Building relationships
- Developing people
- Leading change
- Inspiring others
- Thinking critically
- Having a growth mindset
- Communicating clearly
- Creating accountability

Gallup (2023), illustrates the key drivers of employee engagement,



(Gallup, 2023)

85% of employees worldwide are not engaged, research indicates this is because engagement is considered an HR topic. Gallup (2023), reveals to turn that percentage around leaders can:

- Set clear expectations.
- Ensure employees have the necessary, equipment, training, and materials to complete their work.
- Create a safe environment.

Table 1 summarizes that a leader should focus more on employee engagement than the leadership style utilized.

<b>Table 1</b>	<b>Employee Engagement</b>	<b>Leadership Styles</b>	<b>Growth Mindset</b>	<b>Emotional Intelligence</b>
Gallup	X		X	
Starbird	X			
Peters	X			
Luthans	X	X	X	
Gransberry	X		X	X

### **Resulting Actions**

The purpose of this research is to understand if a leader's engagement is more important than the leadership styles utilized. The findings of this research will enable Lean instructors who train Lean practitioners and leaders to improve their trainings, by focusing on the importance of employee engagement.

### **Conclusion**

Is there a one size fits all with leadership styles and creating or fostering a positive Lean culture? No, there is not a one size fits all. Each organization has a diverse set of leaders, employees, and work culture.

The academic literature and research that was reviewed indicate that a positive Lean culture is created and fostered by organizations that lead inclusively, empower employees, have open lines of communication, and drive out fear that when processes are improved employees will not lose their jobs.

Lean leaders can align their leadership styles to the needs of their employees and collaborate toward the goals of the organization. According to (Tortorella et al., 2021),

Leaders must know what type of culture exists or did exist. An organizational culture characterized as Development, may have leaders who prefer the Servant style and can create and foster a positive Lean culture. However, the same style may not work properly in companies characterized by a 'Hierarchical' culture. Overall, when LM implementation is viewed as a transient process, there might be multiple ways to successfully lead teams. (p.23)

A Lean leader can make it a priority to actively listen, empower employees to be innovators and problem solvers, to reach goals in a collaboratively.

The academic literature reviewed indicated that a positive Lean culture drives excellence, improved employee engagement, increased productivity, and innovation. Lean leaders must incorporate culture discussions in their daily work. Cultural discussions cannot be one-and-done they must be infused into a leader's commitment to the culture.

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