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Leadership and Turnover: How Does Leadership Affect Turnover?

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Capstone - Final Paper

by Brian Berg

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How does leadership style affect organizational turnover?

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Abstract

Leadership is the driving force behind most organizations. The purpose of this study is to explore the link between leadership and organizational turnover. In researching these two topics the question was posed "How do the various styles of leadership affect turnover rates?" Turnover has become an issue of increasing prominence within organizations and it is important to determine what, if any, impact leadership has on this topic. This study utilized an online survey of graduate students, college level faculty as well as individuals working in the private sector. The survey asked participants about their experiences with leadership, past and present, and categorized those responses into three main styles of leadership: Democratic, Autocratic and Laissez-Faire for analysis.

Keywords: leadership, turnover, democratic leadership, autocratic leadership, laissez-faire leadership

Leadership and Turnover:

How does leadership style affect organizational turnover?

Introduction

Employee turnover has become a topic of ever-increasing prominence in both the public and private sectors. As larger numbers of Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and members of Generation Z (born after 1997) enter the workforce, workplaces need to shift to adapt to these younger generations. The Millennial generation has gained the stereotype as job hoppers as "60% of millennials have changed jobs one to four times in the last five years" (Doyle, 2018, p. 16) which could be accurate seeing that "According to Millennial Branding's study on millennial retention, 56 percent of millennials expect to leave their jobs in three years or less" (Kadakia, 2017, p. 6). Turnover costs to employers are rising with estimates suggesting "that the total costs associated with turnover can range from 90% to 200% of annual salary due to recruitment, selection, and training expenses" (Reina, Rogers, Peterson, Byron, & Hom, 2017).

To prevent turnover, a leader must begin to understand their role. A leader must be cognizant of how their leadership style affects the organizational culture and the employees working for that organization. To be a truly effective leader, one must exemplify the culture they wish to promote within the organization as this is duplicated by subordinate members of the leadership team and trickles down to all levels of the organization. With culture and leadership as two sides of the same coin, "you can find companies whose culture helps them perform, but they acquired that culture over a period of years through leadership that worked" (Duncan, 2018, p. 1).

I chose turnover and leadership as my topic of study as it has a direct application in my current role as a leader within the organization I work for. I recently experienced turnover in several positions within my team and the time and effort required to replace these valued team members redirected my attention from other important projects. Upon looking into turnover at my organization further, the costs in the New England Region of the company where I work are in the six-figure range according to my leadership team. In addition to the monetary cost of turnover, it can affect organizational performance as well as "recent research has revealed that high turnover rate will undermine workforce productivity and thus lead to a negative organizational performance" (Wang, Cheng, & Wang, 2016, p. 1069).

It is my hope that I will be able to take the information and knowledge gained during the course of this project and pass that along to my organization in order to assist in keeping our turnover rates low. This will not only save the organization money and time but allow us to better take care of our team members while focusing our attention on servicing our customers.

Review of Literature

Turnover

What is turnover? "Turnover refers to the percent of employees leaving the organization for whatever reason(s)" (Phillips & Edwards, 2008, p. 27). An organization experiences turnover when individuals leave and are replaced. This process costs organizations money with turnover tied to the millennial generation estimated to cost "the US economy $30.5 billion every year" (Kadakia, 2017, p. 5). These costs are in "separation cots, vacancy costs, replacement costs and training costs" (Karsan, 2007, p. 33). Employee turnover takes a huge organizational and financial toll on any company and it is up to the leader of that organization to

set the tone with subordinate leaders as to what the management culture of the company should be and the type of effect it will have on team members within that organization.

Another major aspect of an organization that turnover has a negative cost to is the bench. a company that wants to effectively service its customer base needs to create, intentionally or otherwise, a bench of people, to cover possible turnover" (Karsan, 2007, p. 34). When an organization experiences constant or rapid (or both) turnover, it is nearly impossible to fill all available positions and keep the bench fully staffed as well as "every time someone leaves, the bench has to be augmented once more" (Karsan, 2007, p. 34).

A leader has the ability to inspire a sense of teamwork in his or her team that pushes subordinates to not only stay within the organization but not passively or actively be looking for new employment opportunities as "they unlock higher performance through empowerment, not command and control" (Garton, 2017, para. 3) Leaders strive to lead a team who is engaged, inspired and driven to produce results and it is up to the leader to build that team.

Leadership

What is leadership? The definition of leadership has evolved several times over the last century. The modern definition of the term is "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2019, p. 5). There are two common forms of leadership, assigned leadership and emergent leadership. Assigned leaders are leaders lead "because of their formal position in an organization" (Northouse, 2019, p. 7). An "individual acquires emergent leadership through other people in the organization who support and accept that individual's behavior. This type of leadership is not assigned by position; rather, it emerges over a period through communication" (Northouse, 2019, p. 7). Sometimes "the

person assigned to a leadership position does not always become the real leader in a particular setting" (Northouse, 2019, p. 7) due to a perceived natural leadership ability in some individuals.

Leadership Styles

For the scope of this project I have chosen to limit the leadership styles analyzed to three basic styles: Democratic, Autocratic, and Laissez-Faire. It is important to understand that a good leader "does not simply pick a leadership style and use it regardless of the situation. Instead they will jump from one style to another throughout a period of time" (Sandling, 2015, p. 19).

Democratic leadership is one where a leader "focuses on the needs, opinions and values of their employees" (Sandling, 2015, p. 23). A leader using this style consults with their team "when making decisions that impact the whole team and … ensures they obtain the views of the employees before committing to any actions" (Sandling, 2015, p. 23). While input is solicited from the team the final say in the direction of the team still lies with the leader. This leadership style is very common in workplaces today as "Environments with democratic leaders often yield followers with high morale who are more motivated to generate and offer up creative solutions, and it produces an atmosphere of cooperation and team spirit" (Jakhar, 2017, para. 5). There are downsides to this type of leadership as there may not always be time to bring decisions to the table of the entire team for discussion. Likewise, discussion could take too long or split the team into different factions. "Democratic leadership works best in situations where group members are skilled and eager to share their knowledge. It is also important to have plenty of time to allow people to contribute, develop a plan and then vote on the best course of action" (Jakhar, 2017, para. 9).

Autocratic or authoritarian leadership is the opposite of democratic leadership and "is sometimes referred to as the 'classic' or 'traditional' approach to leadership. (Sandling, 2015, p.

18). This leadership style is one where little to no input is asked of the team being led. "An autocratic leader will tell people what to do rather than ask them" (Sandling, 2015, p.18). While this style of leadership has been known historically to produce results, not all team members respond well to this style. "In some situations, and in some organizational cultures, autocratic leadership is called for. Dan Ackerman became the CEO at General Motors in 2010, a time when quick results were needed." (DuBrin, 2016, p. 126). In order to turn the company around, Ackerman needed to be able to make decisive decisions quickly and with little input from the leadership team. This style of leadership was effective in reversing the course of the company and helped the company weather the storm of the great recession.

The Laissez-Faire style of leadership is "all about providing complete freedom for employees to work as they see fit" (Sandling, 2015, p. 34) This style empowers team members to manage themselves and their schedules responsibly in order to ensure goals are met with little oversight from the team leader. This leadership style "is thought to motivate and enthuse staff" (Sandling, 2015, p. 34) which fosters employee engagement and promotes creativity within the workforce. This style requires a leader to trust their team to accomplish their tasks with little to no oversight and trust the team to ensure that this openness is not taken advantage of. This style of leadership is utilized by some of the biggest companies, Google is an example. "Whenever the public are able to get a glimpse inside their headquarters it is not uncommon to see Google staff socializing, discussing, working in bespoke clusters and generally being creative in the way they approach their jobs" (Sandling, 2015, p. 34). With Google landing the number one spot on the Forbes "Best Companies to Work For" list in 2019, team members are certainly responding positively to this leadership style and are producing results.

Leadership as a Reason for Turnover

Turnover has been an extensively studied topic since the early 20th century and the reasons employees give for leaving their jobs has changed dramatically as time has progressed. Research has shown that in the 21st century, people have increasingly left "managers, not companies" (Heninger, 2018, p. 9). Recently, Gallup CEO Jim Clifton remarked, "The single biggest decision you make in your job – bigger than all the rest – is who you name [leader]. When you name the wrong person [leader], nothing fixes that bad decision. Not compensation, not benefits – nothing" (Heninger, 2018, p. 9). Leaders need to remember that their team are people rather than numbers as "common business focus on processes, procedures and results ignored the human dimension of work and productivity. Leaders need to keep in mind that their team are, at the root, "social beings with the need for soft skills such as encouragement, appreciation and achievement. If a boss denies these fundamental needs – even if the financial rewards are great – most employees will be quick to look elsewhere" (Higginbotton, 2015, para. 4).

Leaders need to ensure they are taking the time to engage their team members in discussion and support them in their roles. Senior leaders in an organization need to work towards freeing up time for managers to spend with their team. As Bill Conerly stated, line level leaders are "pretty busy: reports, compliance, handling customer complaints, and so forth. Adding additional work to an over-worked manager is a huge de-motivator and risks losing the [leader], too" (Conerly, 2018, para. 5).

Leader-Member Exchange

"Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory is founded on the notion that leaders form relationships with their subordinates that fall into two broad groups: an in-group characterized by

strong exchange relationships, and an out-group that lacks solid leader connections" (Miller, 2017, para. 1). The "in-group" characterized in the LMX theory is one that forms a strong relationship with their leader and is rewarded with increased responsibilities, recognition and enjoys a certain degree of latitude or independence within their organization. By contrast, the "out-group" has a more detached relationship with their superior and receives less recognition and less latitude within the organization.

The LMX theory defines three distinct stages in which the relationship between leader and subordinate is formed. The first stage, role-taking, takes place upon the subordinate joining the team. During this time the leader assesses the team member's capabilities. The second state, role-making, begins when the leader assigns tasks to the new team member. During this stage the leader observes "the new member's skills and ethics and places the new member mentally into either the in-group or out-group" (Miller, 2017, para. 3). The final stage, routinization, is where routines are established between the leader and team member.

Being in the "in" or "out" group can have a great effect on whether a team member becomes engaged or not. Engagement is a key factor in the likelihood of an employee to stay within an organization with an engaged team member defined as one who is "involved in, enthusiastic about and committed to their work and workplace" (Harter & Adkins, 2015, para. 2). Studies have shown that "Fully engaged employees remain with their organization, produce more, and are more efficient" (Phillips, Phillips, & Ray, 2016). Members of the "in-group" receive greater input on the decisions made and additional support from their supervisor, they are often considered "rising stars" within an organization and perform to a higher degree than those placed in the "out-group".

"Out-group" members tend to stay in that subset as "members of the out-group receive few chances to shine and have little chance to change the leader's initial opinion of them" (Miller, 2017, para. 6). Members of the "out-group" also produce average to lower results in their work and are considered more expendable by their organization's leadership.

Good Turnover

While turnover is costly to an organization in terms of time, money and productivity it can also be positive for an organization. "Not all turnover is detrimental to the company – if underperforming employees leave, this benefits the company in the long run" (Karsan, 2007, p. 35). As described in the LMX theory, employees who are not identified as having the potential as high performers are placed in the "out-group" are more likely to leave an organization. Grouped with a lower performing subset of employees, the loss of these team members on an organization may have a net positive effect and may occur naturally as "high turnover tends to occur among poor performers" (Mcevoy & Cascio, 1987, p. 750). While the upfront cost in replacing them may be high, the long-term effect of the replacement of a low performing employee with a high performing employee can be great.

Job Embeddedness

Job embeddedness is the theory that "describes a web of forces that cause people to feel they cannot leave their job" (Agrawal & Singh, 2017, p. 12). There are several factors which cause people to feel as if they are unable to leave their job such as relationships with their co-workers or supervisor, how their job fits in with other aspects of their lives and how easily they would be able to separate from their job. These links can be both formal and informal connections they have with their position and the people they work with.

The embedded individual is one whose job can be influenced by an organization's leadership. In an environment of inclusiveness, flexibility, and understanding promoted by an organization's leader team members will feel have a more difficult time breaking from the organization and turning over. An organization's culture is created, in part, its leader and it is up to an organization's leader to promote and inspire team members to embrace the culture of the organization to which they are a part of.

Organizational culture is defined as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaption and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, 2010, p. 236). Leaders have the ability to define the culture of an organization and can therefore set the tone for the work done within. As stated by Jim Whitehurst, "Culture is learned behavior — it's not a by-product of operations. It's not an overlay. We create our organizational culture by the actions we take; not the other way around" (Whitehurst, 2016, para. 2). It is this culture that embeds itself within the organization's members and binds them to the organization itself. While there are many factors that can lead to an employee feeling embedded to their job, culture stands out as the front runner in the studies reviewed.

Methodology

Participants

Data for this study was collected via anonymous online survey. The survey was sent to graduate level students in the programs of Management, Leadership and Project Management as well as select faculty at Granite State College in New Hampshire. It was also posted on the workplace social networking site LinkedIn. While it is difficult to determine the exact number of

potential subjects this survey was distributed to, 123 students received the survey at Granite State College.

Materials and Procedure

       The survey distributed consisted of two main questions, each of which had four to five sub-questions which were dependent on the answers given to previous questions. The survey was distributed via email by my Professor, Kathy DesRoches, to participants at Granite State College and posted as a status update to my personal account on LinkedIn.com. The survey was live for 10 days and partially completed surveys were deleted after 3 days of non-entry.

       Below are the questions asked of survey participants. I created them in order to answer some basic questions to close some gaps in my research. First, I needed to determine if participants had left an organization due to dissatisfaction with that organization's leadership, what style of leadership drove them to leave and if employee engagement was linked to that dissatisfaction. I also needed to determine if participants had stayed within an organization to satisfaction with that organization's leadership, what style of leadership influenced them to stay and if employee engagement was linked to that satisfaction. I wanted to keep the survey under 5 minutes in order to ensure that respondents did not leave mid-way through due to time constraints and I appeared to put the right mix together of content vs. time.

Survey Questions:

1. Consent to survey participation.

2. Have you ever left an organization due to dissatisfaction with the organization's leadership?

    a. If yes, please describe the leadership style of the leader(s)/manager(s)/boss(es)

        you were dissatisfied with and explain what influenced your decision to leave that

        organization.

    b. If yes, did you feel engaged within the organization?

        i. If yes, why?

        ii. If no, why?

    c. If yes, what could have been done differently by your

        leader(s)/manager(s)/boss(es) which would have influenced your decision to stay in

        that organization?

3. Have you ever stayed in an organization due to satisfaction with the organization's

    leadership?

    a. If yes, please describe the leadership style of the leader(s)/manager(s)/boss(es)

        you were satisfied with and explain why that influenced your decision to stay in

        that organization.

    b. If yes, did you feel engaged within the organization?

        i. If yes, why?

        ii. If no, why?

Results

       The survey distributed received 40 responses. Of those 40 respondents, 29 answered

"yes" to the question "Have you ever left an organization due to dissatisfaction with the

organization's leadership?" (Appendix A, Figure A-1). Of those 29 respondents who answered

"yes" 17 listed autocratic, 7 listed laissez-faire, 0 listed democratic, 4 people did not respond and

2 listed a response that could not be categorized (Appendix A, Figure A-1-a). Respondents who

answered "yes" were asked if they felt engaged within that organization. 14 respondents felt that they were engaged in that organization, 10 felt they were not and 4 did not respond to the question (Appendix A, Figure A-1-b).

Twenty-nine of the forty respondents also answered "yes" to the question "Have you ever stayed in an organization due to satisfaction with the organization's leadership?" (Appendix A, Figure A-2) Of those 29 respondents who answered "yes" 18 listed democratic, 5 listed laissez-faire, 0 listed autocratic, 3 did not respond and 3 listed a response that could not be categorized (Appendix A, Figure A-2-a). Respondents who answered "yes" were asked if they felt engaged within that organization, 25 felt they were engaged in that organization, 3 felt they were not and 1 did not respond to the question (Appendix A – Figure A-2-b).

Conclusion

With the data collected, I was able to answer the question posed at the start of the project, "do various styles of leadership affect organizational turnover rates?" The research during my literature review gave me a great base and a wealth of knowledge on the subject and the data collected via survey helped to fill in the missing information required to form a conclusion.

The results of the survey confirmed that the leadership style of an organization's leader does affect turnover rates within that organization with 29 out of 40 survey respondents (72.5%) reporting that they had left a position due to the leadership style of their leader (Appendix A, Figure A-1). Among the 29 survey respondents who indicated they had left an organization due to turnover 17 (58.6%) reported the style of that leader to be autocratic.

The autocratic style of leadership has been shown before to "significantly enhance…employee turnover intention" (Wang, Cheng, & Wang, 2016, p. 1080). The data from

this study correlates with this as the majority of respondents listed autocratic as the style of leadership that drove them to leave their organization. While autocratic leadership can be "liberating for people who work well with clear directives under leaders who understand exactly what people do and why their roles are important" (St. Thomas University, 2018) it can also conflict with team members who are looking for a creative environment or one where they are given the freedom to succeed and fail on their own. This style of leadership was not listed as a style that influenced respondents to stay within an organization (**Appendix A**, Figure A-2-a).

Respondents also identified the laissez-faire style of leadership as one that drove them to leave their organization with 7 respondents listing this style (24.1%) (Appendix A, Figure A-1-a). With Laissez-faire defined as "a style that gives group members the freedom to do basically what they want with almost no direction" (DuBrin, 2016, p. 96) some team members feel that this style leads to their leader not showing enough interest in their role or the tasks assigned. The laissez-faire style was listed as a style that influenced respondents to stay in an organization by only 5 (17.2%) (Appendix A, Figure A-2-a) respondents.

The democratic style of leadership was not listed by any respondents as a style that pushed them to leave an organization. This style of leadership promotes engagement with a team and "empowers staff and places them at the center of the decision making process" (Sandling, 2015, p. 23). This style was listed by a majority of respondents (62%, Appendix A, Figure A-2-a) as the style of leadership that influenced them to stay within an organization.

With employees who left an organization due to leadership dissatisfaction, 48% of respondents felt engaged within the organization in contrast to 34.4% (Appendix A, Figure A-1-b) who did not. While employees were not satisfied with their leadership, it did not negatively

affect organizational engagement for most. For employees who stayed with an organization due to leadership satisfaction, 86.2% reported feeling engaged within the organization while 10.3% (Appendix A, Figure A-2-b) did not.

In analyzing these results, autocratic leadership can clearly be tied to driving employees from organizations while democratic leadership can clearly be tied to employee retention. Autocratic leaders were vilified in survey responses as non-flexible and difficult to work with. Democratic leaders were listed as caring and their team members enjoyed having input on projects and tasks assigned. The laissez-faire style of leadership was seen as both positive and negative by survey respondents. This style of leadership was seen by some in the negative group as uncaring and unmotivated while it was seen by others in the positive group as giving them the freedom to work on tasks as they please.

A good leader needs to know when to shift their leadership style as situations arise. It is important to "take the time to let the situation unravel and then apply the right leadership style to the right situation" (Boss, 2015, para. 9). Based on the survey results, team members responded favorably when asked for input and collaboration on the tasks at hand and responded negatively to heavy-handed leadership. In order to get the most out of a team, the democratic style is the style that should be employed in most situations. This style will foster the collaboration and teamwork needed to accomplish any task and grow as a team.

The next step for this project is to take it to my regional leadership. We will be using the data and research as a reference in putting together a leadership training for my organization. This training will focus on teaching our leaders how to identify the style of leader they are and how that style can affect their team. We will delve into the various styles of leadership and which

styles are seen by teams as effective and which are not. It is my hope that by making leaders in my region aware of the affect their leadership has on their teams, they will adjust their styles as needed to ensure that our teams engaged. With more engaged teams and more cognizant leaders leading those teams we should see a reduction in our turnover rates.

Recommendations

The is project was limited by size and scope. Due to the 12-week nature of the Capstone course, the number of leadership styles studied were limited to three in order to expediate the data collection and analytics process. Further studies should broaden the styles of leadership included and should include sub-styles. Survey respondents were limited by the resources available. The size of the participant pool should be increased to ensure over 100 respondents with a more diverse pool of respondents included. With additional leadership styles included the study would be able to identify additional styles and sub-styles that make an impact on organizational turnover.

Another limitation was the fact that our Professor, Kathy DesRoches, sent out the survey for this project in a group email with three other surveys as well. Consequently, due to the fact that more than one survey was disseminated to potential respondents at once, some may not have been inclined to take all surveys distributed. If further research were to be conducted, the survey should be distributed alone, with no additional surveys, in order to encourage as many potential respondents as possible to view and complete the survey.

In summary, if further research is completed on the subject, I would recommend including additional leadership styles and sub-styles in those categories. Including additional leadership styles will allow researchers to answer the question posed more specifically and

would allow researchers to potentially identify additional styles that both drive team members out of organizations and styles that influence them to stay. By distributing the survey individually rather than in a group email, it will encourage more participation and potentially increase the survey sample size. I would also suggest opening participation to other colleges in the University System of New Hampshire, again to increase sample size. With additional survey respondents, the data collected will tell a more accurate story of leadership and its affect on turnover.

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Appendix A

Figure A-1

Have you ever left an organization due to dissatisfaction with the organization's leadership?

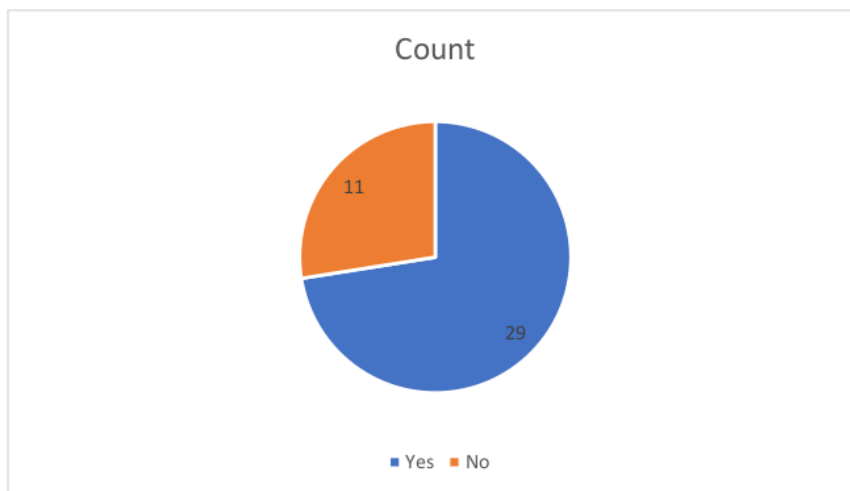| Answer	Count
Yes	29
No	11

Figure A-1-a

If yes, please describe the leadership style of the leader(s)/manager(s)/boss(es) you were

dissatisfied with and explain why that influenced your decision to leave that organization.

Type of Leadership Style	Count
Autocratic	17
Democratic	0
Laissez-faire	7
No Response	4
Non-Categorized	2
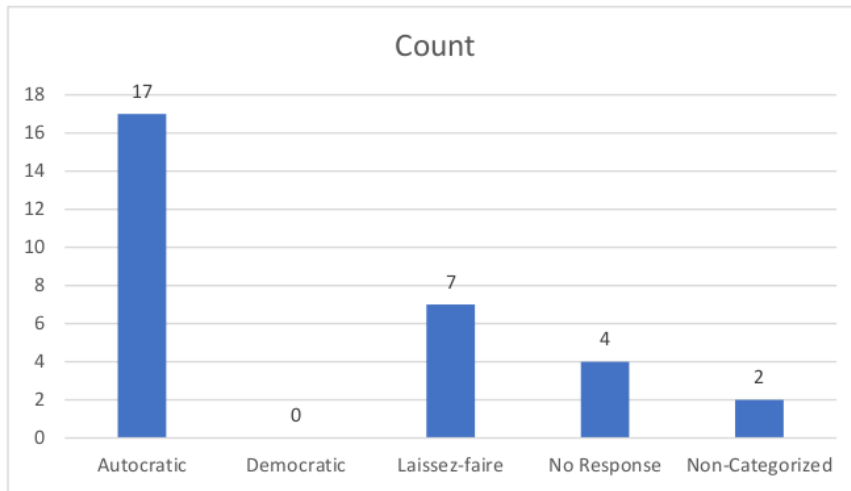
Figure A-1-b

Did you feel engaged in that organization?

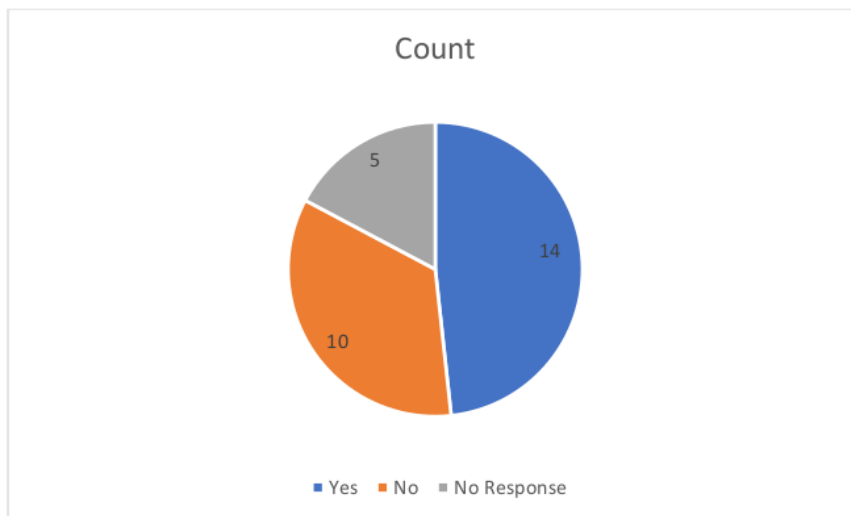| Did you feel engaged?	Count
Yes	14
No	10
No Response	5

Figure A-2

Have you ever stayed with an organization due to dissatisfaction with the organization's leadership?

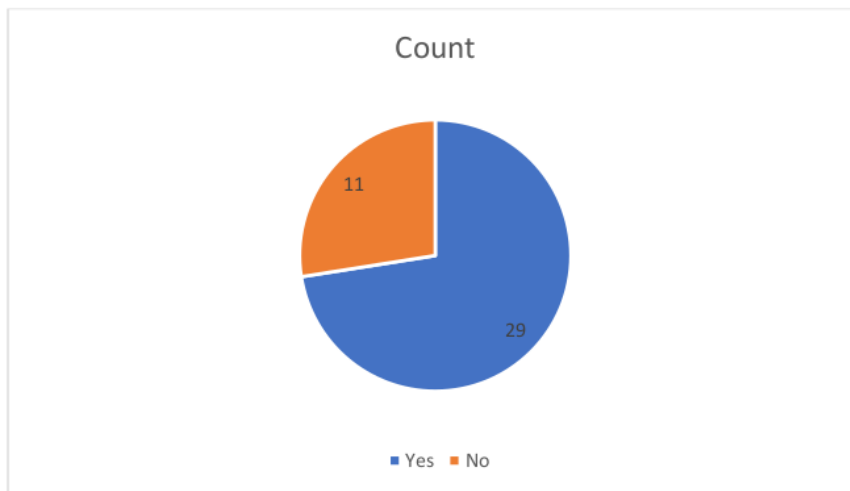| Answer	Count
Yes	29
No	11

Figure A-2-a

If yes, please describe the leadership style of the leader(s)/manager(s)/boss(es) you were

dissatisfied with and explain why that influenced your decision to stay within that organization.

Type of Leadership Style	Count
Autocratic	0
Democratic	18
Laissez-faire	5
No Response	3
Non-Categorized	3

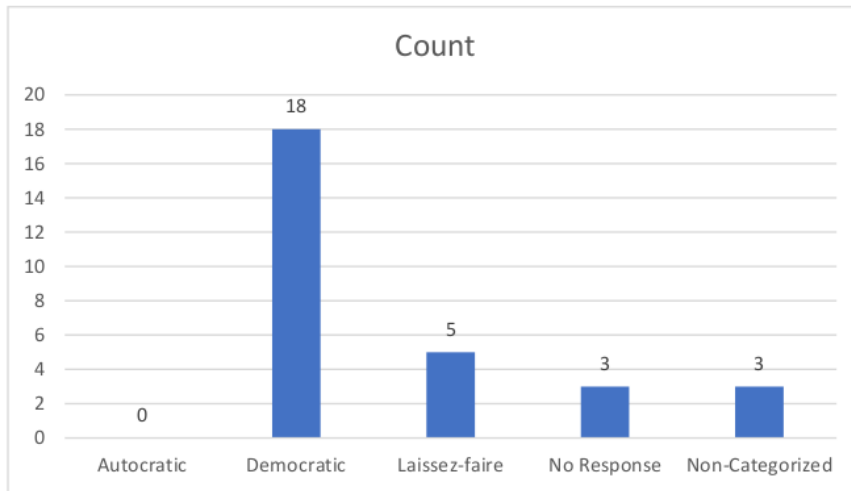*Figure A-1-b*

Did you feel engaged in that organization?

Did you feel engaged?	Count
Yes	25
No	3
No Response	1