

# Equity Leadership and Employee Engagement: A Case Study

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## Abstract

*This paper explores equity leadership and its potential to enhance employee engagement. It builds on Homans' social exchange theory and incorporates elements from Alderfer's ERG theory. Equity leadership adopts a tiered approach in which leaders address employees' needs. This phenomenological qualitative case study examined participants' experiences in detail. The study focused on mid-level managers at a Midwest company with around 2,000 employees who practiced equity leadership. This approach enabled researchers to gain insight into equity leadership and employee engagement. The guiding research question was: How does Equity Leadership influence employee engagement? Researchers used thematic analysis. The thematic coding process identified twelve codes, which were consolidated into the main theme of organizational synergy. Specifically, equity leadership fosters this synergy and enhances employee engagement. Participants described equity leadership through leaders' support of resources, relationship, and opportunity needs, aligning the original 12 codes with these constructs. While organizational synergy was the primary theme, the identified codes supported the EL construct of employee resources, relationships, and opportunities.*

## Keywords

Employee Engagement • Equity Leadership • Organizational Synergy

## Introduction

An abundance of social science research explores various leadership theories and their consequences on organizational cultures and outcomes (Hurtienne & Hurtienne, 2024). These theories influence employee engagement (EE), which in turn, is correlated with positive organizational outcomes (Hurtienne et al., 2021). The field of Human Resource Development (HRD) actively investigates the intersection of leadership theories and EE as it recognizes the crucial role of EE in organizational success. Research consistently demonstrates that highly engaged employees exhibit increased effort, creativity, and performance, while also experiencing reduced stress and burnout (Shuck, 2020b). As Hurtienne and Hurtienne (2024) states, "No organization can reach its full potential if its own employees are not fully engaged and productive" (p. 96). Studies consistently highlight the positive impact of EE on organizational productivity and success (Al-Hazi, 2024; Hurtienne et al., 2021; Ramlall, 2008; Shuck, 2020b; Thene et al., 2024). Conversely, a lack of engagement can have significant repercussions. For instance, research suggests that a staggering 76% of employees actively seek new employment opportunities when they feel undervalued by their organization and leaders (Gallup, 2025a). Furthermore,

statistics reveal that only 25% of employees feel connected to their organization's culture, and only 33% feel a sense of belonging (Gallup, 2022). High employee turnover incurs significant financial costs, with estimations suggesting that replacing a departing employee can cost an organization between one-half and two times their annual salary (Gallup, 2019). These alarming statistics underscore the need for organizations to prioritize EE.

Notably, in 2024 only 21% of the global workforce and 31% of the North American workforce reported feeling effectively engaged at work (Gallup, 2025c). Highly engaged employees demonstrate innovative behaviour, better performance results, and a greater intent to stay with an organization (Chakraborty et al., 2024; Gull et al., 2020; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Employees who are engaged, supported, and find meaning in their work can impact organizational productivity and success (Hurtienne et al., 2021; Ramlall, 2008). Given the influence of direct leaders on EE (Hurtienne et al., 2021), it is imperative to understand how leadership approaches can influence employees. Organizations can make informed decisions to cultivate a more engaged and productive workforce, particularly when

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accounting for the significant cost implications associated with employee turnover, as they consider variables impacting EE, performance, and retention. Previous research underscores the critical need to explore leadership models that can foster a more engaged workforce.

Leaders have a profound effect on EE (Hurtienne et al., 2021); therefore, it is imperative to consider leadership approaches that result in positive organizational outcomes and how they can be implemented. Edelman & Knippenberg (2018) noted that the emotional aspect of leadership is considered a necessary component of effective leadership, tying into the foundations of equity leadership (EL). When employees feel valued by their leaders they feel a stronger sense of commitment to the organization, resulting in positive organizational outcomes (Kim & Beehr, 2020). Due to the complexities of leadership (Northouse, 2022), human resource development has a responsibility to continue to understand the foundations of leadership approaches and how they can be put into practice.

This paper investigates the framework of EL and its potential to increase EE. Equity leadership theory builds upon the reciprocal interactions emphasized in Homans' (1958) social exchange theory (SET) and incorporates elements from Alderfer's (1969) Existence, Relatedness, and Growth (ERG) theory of motivation (Hurtienne & Hurtienne, 2024). This leadership approach aims to identify individual employee needs across personal and professional, resource, relationship, and opportunity domains (Hurtienne & Hurtienne, 2024). By understanding these needs, EL seeks to empower and motivate employees, enabling them to reach their full potential within the organization. This qualitative study aims to explore the experiences of employees who work in an EL environment to better understand the effects of EL on EE. The research question guiding this qualitative study is: How does the framework of Equity Leadership influence employee engagement?

## Theoretical Base

### Social Exchange Theory

SET is a prominent framework for understanding EE (Goyal et al., 2023; Goyal et al., 2024). This theory posits that "obligations are generated through a series of interactions between parties who are in a state of reciprocal interdependence" (Saks, 2006, p. 603). As such, SET offers a valuable lens to analyse workplace behaviour and decision-making (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Through the lens of SET, an employee's engagement is seen as initiating a reciprocal cycle of positivity with the employer (Hurtienne et al., 2021). The theory emphasizes that relationships can evolve into states characterized by "trusting, loyal,

and mutual commitment" (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005, p. 875). This perspective highlights the interdependent nature of the employer-employee relationship, where both parties contribute and benefit from positive engagement.

SET provides a valuable framework for examining employee expectations regarding their direct supervisors and organizational leaders. Furthermore, the theory underscores the importance of organizational resources such as salary, recognition, and trust (Blau, 1964; Fuller et al., 2006). At its core, SET posits that individuals, both leaders and employees, engage in rational decision-making within the work environment, seeking actions that maximize their self-interest. In essence, this framework suggests that the continuation or termination of professional relationships hinges on a cost-benefit analysis conducted by both parties (Hurtienne et al., 2023).

## Theoretical Background

### Equity Leadership

EL is a recently developed leadership theory that recognizes each employee is an individual with unique needs (Hurtienne & Hurtienne, 2024). By definition, EL "identifies individual employee's personal and professional resource, relationship, and opportunity needs in an effort to support and encourage employees to reach their fullest potential in the workforce" (Hurtienne & Hurtienne, 2024, p. 609). With EL in practice, organizations should see an increase in positive organizational outcomes (Hurtienne & Hurtienne, 2024).

The theory was based on two foundations — social exchange theory (Homans, 1958) and Existence, Relatedness, and Growth (ERG) theory of motivation (Alderfer, 1969). The theories that support EL highlight the reciprocal relationships that occur between leaders and their direct reports, as well as the individual needs each person brings to the workforce. An equity leader's objective is to learn about each individual employee and understand each person's nuances. With this understanding, leaders can better connect with employees and support them in their resource, relationship, and opportunity needs.

EL requires a tiered leadership approach, where all leaders within an organization consider employees' needs (Hurtienne & Hurtienne, 2024). Each leader is responsible for developing relationships with their direct reports, which allows for communication regarding resource, relationship, and opportunity needs both in and out of the workplace. As individual needs are considered, employees can feel more valued, thus engaging in the reciprocal relationships of social exchange theory.

Leaders who practice EL connect with each employee through one-on-one conversations to better understand each person's

needs. While leaders are not required to fulfil employees' needs, the leader can listen to an employee's needs and offer empathy, support, and guidance. When personal and professional needs are acknowledged in the workforce, organizations could see an increase in engagement, productivity, and retention (Hurtienne & Hurtienne, 2024).

### Employee Engagement

EE stems from positive psychology, prompting researchers to explore human factors like environmental, job-related, and individual traits that promote sustained positive behaviours (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017). The outcome of EE helps to positively impact organizational productivity and employee retention (Arulsenthilkumar & Punitha, 2024; Chakraborty et al., 2024; Chopra et al., 2024; Frank Nana, 2024; Gallup, 2025b; Kundu & Lata, 2017). Understanding the importance of EE and its connection to organizational outcomes helps leaders identify better interventions for organizations seeking a competitive advantage. (Ali et al., 2024; Anitha, 2014; Gameda & Lee, 2020; Mazzetti & Schaufeli, 2022; Zhang et al., 2014). Research in human resources has been crucial in helping organizations better understand EE and the key theories that link engagement to improved organizational success (Al-Hazi, 2024; Alam et al., 2023; Saks, 2006; Shuck, 2020a; Thene et al., 2024; Xiaoming et al., 2022). Even with all the research that has occurred, there are research gaps that remain in this field (Byrne, 2022). "There remains tremendous confusion about what EE is, what it means in both research and practice, and how organizations can take proactive steps to harness the full power of a fully engaged workforce" (Shuck, 2020a, p. 1).

Much of today's EE research is rooted in William Kahn's studies on personal engagement and workplace conflict, which showed that engaged employees genuinely commit to their employers (Kahn, 1990). Kahn's 1990 definition of personal engagement established a foundation for understanding EE. He described it as "the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's preferred self in task behaviours that foster connections with work and others, as well as personal presence (physically, cognitively, and emotionally), and active full role performance" (p. 700). His findings importantly underscore that when psychological, social, and environmental conditions are satisfied, employees are more likely to invest in their organization's success. Following this, Shuck et al. (2014) examined EE from the employees' viewpoint. Engaged employees shared their experiences concerning psychological safety, availability, and meaningfulness, linking these ideas to Kahn's research. Later, Shuck et al. (2014) defined EE as "a positive, active, work-related psychological state operationalized by the maintenance, intensity, and direction of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural energy" (p. 269).

Numerous researchers have delved into EE. Shuck et al. (2017) looked at EE as employees actively participating in their tasks, shown by physiological, cognitive, and emotional investment. Furthermore, Reissova and Papay (2021) identified a strong positive relationship between EE and job satisfaction, indicating that increasing engagement opportunities can enhance job satisfaction among employees. Saks (2006) developed a multidimensional engagement scale that distinguished between role/job engagement and organizational engagement. He found job engagement mediated the relationship between factors influencing EE and job satisfaction (Suhartanto & Brien, 2018). This in-depth engagement measure was designed to evaluate the "psychological presence in both one's role and organization" (Saks, 2006, p. 608), highlighting psychological responses. Cesário and Chambel (2017) found that both engagement and organizational commitment correlated positively with employee performance. Additionally, a study by Khalid and Khalid (2015) showed a significant link between organizational commitment with EE and job satisfaction. This aligns with literature asserting that engagement is crucial as it reflects the commitment employees feel toward their organization (Werhane & Royal, 2009).

Enhancing EE can be a crucial first step to boosting human capital. There are various positive outcomes associated with EE (Byrne, 2022), making it essential for organizations to comprehend how to increase EE. "EE should be viewed as a process that will require nurturing and ongoing interactions with employees" (Hurtienne et al., 2021, p. 151). Hurtienne (2022) also explained that EE involves the level of passion, productivity, and performance employees are willing to contribute to the organization's success. High turnover results in considerable costs, necessitating consideration of individual needs. Emerging EE concepts are shifting research focus from an organizational perspective to an individual-centred approach (Shuck, 2020a), underscoring the need to better understand EE as a strategy for employment. Organizations experiencing heightened individual EE typically see more staff dedicated to the mission, vision, and key performance indicators (KPIs), leading to an increase in the three Ps: passion, productivity, and performance (Hurtienne, 2022, p. 95).

Shuck et al. (2014) pointed out that engaged employees tend to remain with their companies instead of seeking external opportunities. Mehrzi and Singh (2016) noted that EE boosts performance, profitability, customer loyalty, and safety. Initiatives focused on improving employee retention not only enhance retention rates but also drive productivity (Rombaut & Guerry, 2020). Additionally, Shuck (2020b) informed the human resource development community that engaged employees

work harder, are more creative, and outperform their colleagues ... experience life with less stress, report higher levels of wellbeing, are less frequently burned out, and have a higher life satisfaction score than other employees who report lower levels of engagement (p. 59).

## Methodology

This study aimed to investigate how EL influences EE from a qualitative perspective. A phenomenological case study was used to understand participants' individual experiences in detail. Case studies are often used to provide a deep understanding of one, specific case (Creswell, 2014); an appropriate approach in continuing to deepen the understanding of EL. This methodology was chosen to thoroughly uncover the practice of EL within one organization to better understand how it is practiced and its influence on EE.

The case for this study was a company in the Midwestern region of the United States of America that employed approximately 2,000 individuals. Specifically, the study focused on mid-level managers who experience and practice EL. Through the phenomenological case study approach, the researchers were able to gain in-depth insight into the phenomenon of EL from an organization that was implementing EL practices. The research question guiding this qualitative study was: How does the framework of Equity Leadership influence employee engagement? A university Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the research plan.

## Research Paradigm

Paradigms are philosophical assumptions or a basic set of beliefs that define the nature of reality (Lincoln et al., 2011) and can serve as guiding frameworks or lenses for social science research projects. Frameworks reflect philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality, acknowledging its multifaceted nature (Lincoln et al., 2011). The constructivist lens emphasizes the importance of considering multiple perspectives in a study, which fosters an understanding of a phenomenon by uncovering shared meanings through collaboration with participants (Guba, 1990). In essence, constructivism delves into how social interactions influence the beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of both researchers and participants (Adom et al., 2016). This collaborative perspective positions the research team as co-creators of knowledge alongside participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Constructivism was an appropriate approach for this research study as the participants and researchers co-constructed an understanding of EL.

By actively engaging with participants, researchers can glean rich data through each interaction. This is crucial because social realities are interconnected and cannot be fully grasped in isolation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the research journey, reflexivity, the act of critically examining one's own biases and assumptions, becomes paramount (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). This iterative process of co-construction with participants fostered deeper understanding, richer knowledge, and, ultimately, more meaningful and impactful discoveries about how EL is practiced and its influence on EE.

## Methods

The research question guiding this qualitative study is: How does the framework of Equity Leadership influence employee engagement? The research focused on a purposive sample of 12 mid-level managers from various corporate departments. These participants included four store managers, three assistant directors of retail (e.g., regional managers), three department directors, one centre store buyer, and one HR director. Each of the participants noted their progressive promotions within the organization based on continuous mentorship and internal training and development.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary research method. Interviews were utilized as the sole data collection method as a means for hearing participants' in-depth perspectives. To ensure research rigour, interview guides were developed based on a comprehensive literature review, research protocol, and a pilot test (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Ten males and two females were interviewed. Each interview was conducted in person and lasted approximately thirty minutes. Before each interview, participants were informed about the research project and their rights. Each participant consented to participate in the study. During each interview, researchers shared the interview questions in writing and verbally. Definitions of EL and EE were also shared to inform the discussion, allowing for a shared understanding of each term. All interviews were audio-recorded by a third-party company and transcribed.

The researchers maintained reflexivity throughout the study, adapting to participant responses and ensuring knowledge co-construction (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To further the data analysis, the researchers incorporated field notes and journals alongside the transcripts. These field notes documented observations, reflections, and initial impressions from the researchers during the data collection process.

The researchers then utilized a thematic analysis approach. A rigorous coding process, which began with open coding to identify initial concepts within the data. Subsequently, focused coding allowed for the refinement of these concepts and the development of thematic categories. Through

ongoing dialogue and comparison of notes, the research team ensured consistent application of the coding scheme and trustworthiness of the identified categories. One theme was identified in response to the research question. While saturation was reached at eight participants, data were collected from 12 to ensure no new data came through.

The researchers used a multi-pronged approach to ensure the trustworthiness of their findings. They incorporated strategies recommended by Leedy and Ormrod (2019), such as reflexivity and triangulation, and conducted member checking with an audit trail via a qualitative survey, allowing participants the chance to provide feedback on the findings. Additionally, the research team engaged in regular peer debriefing sessions (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Given, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to discuss emerging findings and refine their interpretations. This comprehensive approach, incorporating multiple data sources and a systematic coding process, ensured an accurate understanding of the phenomenon.

## Findings

The thematic coding process identified a total of 12 codes, which were consolidated into one main theme in response to the research question: organizational synergy. More specifically, in response to the research question, EL creates an organizational synergy that increases EE.

All participants identified EL through descriptions of the environment and examples of leaders supporting resource, relationship, and opportunity needs; therefore, the researchers noted the alignment of the original 12 codes with EL's three constructs. Table 1 provides the codes for each category of needs as a model for engaging in EL in the workforce. The codes are listed from top to bottom indicating the prevalence of each code; those at the top occurred most often.

### Organizational Synergy

Participants described EL as an organizational synergy that occurred throughout the business and as a way of being for all employees. This synergy was noted in the positive organizational culture that resulted in employees feeling valued and respected throughout the organization. With this cohesiveness in mind, the organization continually supports employees and encourages growth for each individual. Interview Participant (I.P.) 1 described it as:

...leading with the team. You are one of the team. You are not necessarily above anybody. The titles don't matter. The goal is to get results. The goal is to better the company. The goal is to also find a way to enjoy

what you're doing and create an atmosphere that's comfortable for everybody, but also that everybody can thrive in and find excitement in their job.

Participants indicated that leaders within the organization "truthfully care about people growing" (I.P. 11). Participant 9 stated, "we sit down and we talk about what's your career pathing look like? What are your opportunities that you feel you have? What are your strengths that you feel you have?" These conversations provided insight into each employee's goals, so leaders had a clear idea of how to support their direct reports. Participant 4 noted, "a good leader, propels people forward and creates other good leaders."

Throughout the interviews, almost every participant noted the importance of working hard and having fun, which created a bond between employees. "We can have that personal connection and be friends while still making good business decisions and holding each other accountable" (I.P. 9). Strong relationships were formed through regularly occurring interactions. According to Participant 4, "we have just such a connection where we can talk on the phone or in person about just anything and everything." Participant 2 described the interactions as:

...creating connections with each other. My leaders have connected with me. I've connected with my people below me per se in this example. But the leaders above me have, we've created such a connection that we truly care about each other. And how they did that along the way with just getting to know each other, working together, not just on a piece of paper, go do this, go do that. But working together and building that trust within each other, by learning everything about each other that almost like as an emotional piggy bank, if that makes sense. So now in my head for my leaders, I want to get the job done for them. I want to do a good job; I want to get results. But almost even more importantly in my head, I don't want to let them down. And we've created that bond through each other and I've created that bond now down the line. And I guess it kind of goes back to that team thing, but I feel like that's how we've created such a strong bond is that we're in it for each other and [for] the end result. We all feel great about at the end of it.

Multiple participants noted EL creates an increase in employee retention, productivity, and EE. The organizational synergy allows employees to feel part of something important they are willing to invest their passion, productivity, and performance into. Each participant spoke with pride and gratitude for the many opportunities they had to learn and grow within the organization.



**Table 1.** Equity Leadership and Employee Engagement Data

| Theme                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Organizational Synergy                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Categories            | Resources                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Relationships                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Opportunities                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Focused Coding</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “All hands on deck”</li> <li>• Goals / vision</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family – knowing each person holistically</li> <li>• Proximity / Visibility</li> <li>• Reciprocal Trust</li> <li>• Reciprocal Respect</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning and growing</li> <li>• “Aces in places” - Leveraging employees’ strengths</li> <li>• Learning through mistakes</li> <li>• Autonomy</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Open Coding</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aligning with organizational vision</li> <li>• Aiming for organizational goals</li> <li>• Supporting organizational mission</li> <li>• All hands on deck</li> <li>• Keeping organizational standards</li> <li>• Hands on leadership</li> <li>• Receiving help when needed</li> <li>• Different paths to same goal</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust</li> <li>• Respect</li> <li>• Reciprocity</li> <li>• Motivator</li> <li>• Cultivating Organizational Culture</li> <li>• Focus on People</li> <li>• Family</li> <li>• Encouragement</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Belief in company</li> <li>• Everyone matters</li> <li>• Engaged employees</li> <li>• Caring</li> <li>• Leading by example</li> <li>• Leaders learning about employees</li> <li>• People-centered</li> <li>• Leaders are available</li> <li>• Formal and informal conversations</li> <li>• Collaborative leading</li> <li>• Working hard and having fun</li> <li>• Open communication</li> <li>• Each person is an individual</li> <li>• Empathy</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuous improvement</li> <li>• Growing professionally</li> <li>• Leaders support growth</li> <li>• Growing holistically</li> <li>• Looking for the right fit for positions in the organization</li> <li>• Constructive feedback</li> <li>• Flexibility in schedules</li> <li>• Personal life comes first</li> <li>• Coaching</li> <li>• Autonomy</li> <li>• Training</li> <li>• Explaining why</li> </ul> |

Organizational synergy was the main theme identified in this research; however, the codes identified which supported the theme, aligned with the EL constructs of employee resource, relationship, and opportunity needs. The following data supports the theme of organizational synergy but is presented to show alignment with the theory of EL.

### Resources

Two codes aligned with the construct *resources* including “all hands on deck” and goals/vision. There were multiple examples that noted leaders were willing to do any job necessary to help the organization including stocking shelves, gathering carts from the parking lot, and making burgers (I.P. 1, 3, 5, 7, 11). Participant 1 stated, “If a store is in need of help, we go get help.” Knowing employees could count on others to provide help when needed “actively engaged teams” (I.P. 5). The organizational goals/vision code was noted as starting with the hiring process. Ensuring there was a culture fit was key to continuing culture-wide EL (I.P. 6, 11, 12). Additionally, the training of leadership expectations started with the interviews; if an individual did not appear to have the ability to be an equity leader, they were not brought into the organization. Once hired, the organization provided training, a clear vision, and goals for employees. Participant 1 explained the resulting culture; “it’s infectious and I think that it’s that trickle-down effect ... If the head is going this way and you understand

what that vision is, you’re going to want to follow it and you’re going to believe in it too.” “Being part of an amazing vision and experience is extremely rewarding” (I.P. 6).

### Relationships

Relationships were discussed in a variety of ways, including describing coworkers as family, noting the proximity/visibility of leaders, reciprocal trust, reciprocal respect, communication, and collaboration that occurred. These relationships were identified as a foundation for the organizational synergy that permeated throughout the organization. Leaders knew the names of employees, their interests, and supported them in their goals. The relationships also allowed leaders to understand how to support each unique individual. Participant 3 noted, “the standard doesn’t change for anyone, but how you work and manage people changes because everyone’s different.” Additionally, relationships made it easier to have difficult conversations due to the trust that was developed (I.P. 2, 3, 9).

The word family was mentioned by nearly every participant, as they felt the organization created a sense of strong belonging to something they cared deeply about. “These guys and gals, whoever above me, below me, we all know everything about each other” (I.P. 2). Part of learning about employees was being visible to them. Leaders noted the example set by the leaders at the top of the organization; they were out in the

stores, side-by-side, helping with tasks that needed to be done (I.P. 1, 6, 12). The leaders' proximity opened the door for communication that fostered relationships.

Leaders had both organic conversations, while working side-by-side, and intentional conversations, in one-on-one meetings, with their direct reports. The organization valued employee's thoughts and ideas, allowing everyone to have a voice. Communication also allowed leaders to provide feedback for employees regarding how goals might be achieved.

Reciprocal trust and respect encouraged employees to feel they could go to leaders with any challenges or needs they had. Participant 5 described "a very high level of trust between all of our leaders that if we can grab hold of an idea and really make it work, then let's try to do it regardless of the roadblocks." Trust and respect provided a foundation for growth, as well. "There's a level of trust within how we communicate with each other, how we enable others to help through processes and guide each other" (I.P.10). Teams were also trusted to engage in business as usual, even when leaders were out of the office. Participant 12 noted that if a leader is gone for a week, "the ship doesn't develop holes and start to sink;" teams are trusted to keep the business afloat.

Collaboration allowed employees to have autonomy, but at the same time, individualized support from leadership. Leaders were willing to work collaboratively and simultaneously continue to encourage growth. Participant 8 stated, "It's more based on tailoring it to my leadership style and how it's going to be effective for me and helping me to see beyond just myself."

Relationships was the strongest code identified in the data. Participants indicated how vital strong, trusting relationships were to the organization's success. Participant 3 summed up relationships in the realization that the brand of the organization is lived behind closed doors.

### Opportunities

Participants recognized opportunities in multiple ways; thus, the codes learning and growing, "aces in places" (leveraging employee's strengths), learning through mistakes, and autonomy were identified. Participants also noted the organizational goals stay the same, yet each individual can determine how goals are achieved. Participant 8 explained the leaders showed EL as they tailored interactions to his personal needs to help him be more effective. In the words of Participant 7, "We don't have a one-size-fits-all approach ... we have customized and specific roles for people."

Learning and growing was a strong theme indicated by almost every participant. Many participants were employed for around twenty years and discussed their movement into higher roles throughout their time in the business. Participant 5 noted how engaging it was to work in an atmosphere where growth

was encouraged, and every day could bring new learning. Through coaching, mentoring, and professional development opportunities, leaders consistently encouraged employees to look toward their next goals. Participant 4 explained,

Everyday coaching and the personal relationships are, I mean, when you're having those conversations, you talk about what your goals and aspirations are. When I first was getting into the director side of things, it was important to them that we sat down and we talked about what my future goals were. It wasn't just you want a bigger paycheck? It was why are you doing this and where do you see yourself in five years and are you still thinking about being with [the business] and do you want to stop there or do you want to get into the corporate level? Where is your path going?

In addition to encouraging growth, leaders also helped employees to find jobs that were the right fit, often referred to by participants as putting "aces in places." Participant 7 explained that the organization looks for where employees can find success. Participant 2 described,

I was struggling. Everything fell on me ... they saw where I was at personally, mentally, everything, they were willing to work with me and say, [I.P.2] ... they could have easily let me walk out the door. They could have said, well, the only role for you is a store director and if you can't do it, we don't have a spot for you. But they said, we care about you. We know what type of person he is. You just need a change of scenery. Moved me over to what I do now ... now I am happier than I've ever been.

Even when employees seemed to be in the right places, it was human nature to make mistakes. Participants indicated the business was a safe environment where they could learn from mistakes rather than be ridiculed for them. Participant 10 explained,

We're there to help them and kind of work them through that process. And that just ties tightly in with that forward vision and understanding when things succeed and when things don't succeed, because then we're there to help them through those processes. It's not just, you're left to the wild and figure it out.

While leaders were available for support, the trusting relationships allowed for autonomy in daily work. Participants indicated they had the autonomy to modify their schedules, attend to personal business, and make decisions within the organization. The opportunities leaders provided through learning, leveraging employee strengths, and autonomy encouraged continuous growth, which participants took great pride in.

## Implications

### HRD Practice Implications

While other leadership styles might focus on one leader at the pinnacle of the organization, EL focuses on leadership at all levels of an organization; each individual is responsible for understanding and practicing EL. This intentional leadership approach creates an organizational synergy with relationships at the helm. Organizational synergy is a cohesive and supportive organizational culture that fosters employee growth, engagement, and performance through equitable leadership practices. The synergy is characterized by:

**Equity:** Seeing each employee as an individual with unique resource, relationship, and growth needs and as individuals who will contribute to the greater whole of the organization. Leaders should hold regular, scheduled individual meetings with direct reports to actively listen to the employee's personal and professional needs. Additionally, informal interactions should provide opportunities to learn more about employee needs.

**Alignment:** Clear alignment of individual and team goals with the broader organizational objectives. Organizational mission, vision, and goals should be reviewed with employees at individual and group meetings to see how individuals can contribute to the greater good of the organization. Additionally, alignment includes ensuring each leader within the organization is practicing EL to create the synergistic organizational environment.

**Collaboration:** Strong teamwork and co-operation among employees at all levels. Leaders should encourage group interactions through informal and formal interactions, including team bonding activities, group projects, and regular team meetings. Collaboration can also include developing an understanding of how each individual works best to better facilitate group interactions. This could be done using assessments to dive deeper into individual personalities and needs.

**Trust:** A high level of reciprocal trust and respect among team members. Trust is developed through every leader/employee interaction; therefore, it is vital for leaders to consciously and actively listen to employees and show respect in each interaction. Leaders should also engage in consistent interactions with employees through regularly scheduled meetings to continually develop trust.

**Open Communication:** Effective and transparent communication channels that facilitate information sharing and problem-solving. Through scheduled and organic interactions, leaders can listen and support employees to ensure employees are able to voice their needs. Leaders should have training and development in communication, including active listening, that can foster open communication with employees.

**Shared Values:** A common set of values and beliefs that guide the organization's culture and behaviour. Each employee should know and support the organization's mission, vision, and values. Additionally, leaders must live the organization's mission, vision, and values; this must be done through actions, not merely words.

**Synergistic Outcomes:** The combined efforts of individuals and teams result in outcomes that are greater than the sum of their individual contributions. With EL practices permeating throughout an organization, there are resulting increases in retention, engagement, and productivity.

This research indicates there are three steps to creating organizational synergy with EL:

1. Hire for mission fit and EL: EL starts with hiring practices and carries through continuous employee learning and growth. Organizations need to hire individuals who are a strong mission fit and are capable of practicing EL. All employees should fully support the organization's mission and feel compelled to live the mission. As employees are onboarded, EL practices should be modelled and taught. As participants noted, the mission and goals do not change; the way each individual is led is where differences can occur.
2. Develop individual trusting relationships: Leaders must consider each employee as an individual with unique resource, relationship, and opportunity needs, recognizing that what works for one employee may not work for another. Within each leadership level, direct report leaders need to get to know individuals personally and professionally to properly provide support. Trusting relationships can allow even the challenges to be approached with an employee's best interests in mind. Regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings where employees are heard, respected, and valued are vital to developing trust between leaders and employees.
3. Leverage employee strengths: Leaders must help employees to continuously grow in areas the employee is passionate about. Additionally, when employees voice unease, leaders should learn about their interests and find ways to leverage their strengths within the organization. This is, again, done through consistent one-on-one meetings with direct reports.

The academic and practical fields of HRD look for ways to unleash expertise and improve performance. This study highlighted the strengths of EL and the importance of developing individuals. The field is reminded that employees who feel connected and part of the organization are more likely to have higher EE, increased retention, and perform better (Burke, 2018, Hurtienne et al., 2021; Swanson & Holton, 2009). This research study advanced the understanding of



EL in practice and notes the organizational synergy that can come of practicing EL organization wide. The findings of this research can be applied to leadership training to help develop and unleash leadership traits that can improve EE.

### HRD Research Implications

The theoretical framework of EL was originally published in the *European Journal of Training and Development* by Hurtienne and Hurtienne (2024). As literature continues to research and discuss EL, this research is proving to have positive implications for EE. Quantitative and qualitative studies have provided information that highlights the value of EL as well as the positive organizational outcomes. EL is still emerging; however, the concept has implications to be used as a theoretical framework for research that looks at concepts such as EE, employee retention, organizational productivity, etc. The tiered leadership that occurs with EL allows leaders to focus on their direct reports; however, the capacity of the number of direct reports for a leader is unknown.

### Future Research

As a new concept, there are many opportunities to continue researching EL. As first steps in the effort to better understand the leadership theory, the researchers recommend:

1. Future research could continue to identify the ideal number of direct reports to be the most effective equity leader. While EL allows leaders to focus on their direct reports, is there a capacity for how many individuals can be served by an equity leader?
2. Additional research could also investigate the barriers to EL. While organizational synergy is the goal, it is one that could present challenges. Understanding the difficulties could provide insight in how to provide EL professional development to help break down the challenges and allow equity leaders to flourish.

### Conclusion

Individual employees bring unique attributes to an organization which can be central to organizational success. Each employee has the choice to decide how engaged they will be with their employer; therefore, organizations should continue to understand factors that lead to increased EE (Hurtienne et al. 2021). According to Saks (2006), "individuals who are more engaged are likely to be in more trusting and high-quality relationships with their employer and will, therefore, be more likely to report more positive attitudes and intentions toward the organization" (p. 603). If an organization wants to create synergy, they need to hire, build relationships, and encourage employees to grow and learn. EL creates organizational

synergy, which means the psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability (Kahn, 1990) can be prime for strong EE. This study focused on EL to help further understand the positive implications the synergistic leadership style has on EE.

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