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Remote Employee Engagement

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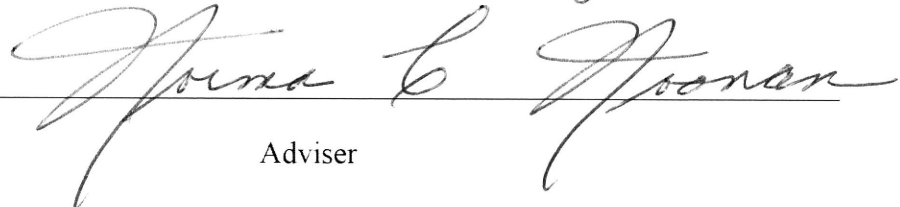Master of Arts in Leadership

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the Action Research Project of

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ABSTRACT

REMOTE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT
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Action Research (ML588) Project

This action research project looks at employee engagement among geographically dispersed teams. The goal of this research is to better understand the theory of engagement and develop a methodology for increasing engagement for teams and individuals that work in a location outside of a main headquarters environment. The focus of this study involves three distinctly different teams. Each team has a unique headquarters environment, but shares the same responsibility of ensuring a safe and secure environment through the leadership and execution of a physical security program. However, each team is also dealing with engagement challenges related to being dispersed geographically from the company's main headquarters location in the Upper Midwest.

Efforts in this action research project include a formal literature review which seeks to define engagement, identify strategies that increase engagement and find tools or methods used to foster engagement in geographically dispersed teams. In addition, this report summarizes findings identified during one-on-one interviews with the leaders of my remote teams.

The end result is an action plan which will be applied to my current leadership responsibilities and used to create and/or maintain engagement for the teams I lead today and those I will lead in the future.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

The world is in constant change as is business. As organizations strive to enhance profitability, leaders are looking beyond their own geographic locations in to find new ways of reducing costs while also increasing production. This change in economic concepts has been defined by Thomas L. Friedman as globalization in his book *The World is Flat* (2005). This economic shift paired with cultural changes in the workplace, that relate to productivity and engagement, has required many business leaders to look for new incentives designed to increase performance levels despite economic pressures in the current economy.

In addition to the shift towards globalization paired with increasing economic pressures, leaders are also noticing a potentially negative financial impact due to a shift in focus by employees. According to a FORUM white paper (2010), employees are becoming "pre-occupied with the impact of a shrinking economy and company downsizing, often leaving them grateful for just being able to keep the jobs they have" (p. 1). This pre-occupation has resulted lowered productivity and motivation thus increasing urgency for leaders to find solutions that increase the level of engagement and return productivity and motivation to the workforce.

For globally dispersed teams, the challenges surrounding employee engagement are even more difficult to address. As technology continues to evolve, it increases the capabilities for businesses of any size to reach further and further across a global landscape. However, technology innovation is also equipping leaders with tools designed bring remote teams closer together in a virtual workplace. These technologies better enable leaders to be successful even when they are not in direct and constant oversight of productivity.

One of the many things that make the organization I work for unique is its dedication to each employee. This dedication to each person is central to the company values that make our organization a fun and rewarding place to work. My company strives to do this by creating an environment of engagement and wellbeing for each and every person. Employees are considered to be a critical asset for the organization and require leaders to investment heavily in their growth and development. Everyone in the organization is expected to work hard, but they are also provided a number of opportunities to engage with the community, with one another, and to have fun as a team in events that are designed to embody the company spirit.

This corporate approach, however, has become a double edged sword for me as a leader of remote teams within the organization. I lead multiple teams located throughout the United States and Canada. While I have been serving in my current capacity for approximately 2 years, our teams have been through a multitude of changes in strategy, leadership and economic pressure. These challenges have required a great deal of focus during my tenure. However, as the organization has stabilized, I have started to look deeper into performance and motivation of my remote teams as our company's internal performance measures have indicated some concerns that are potentially related to the topic of engagement.

METHODOLOGY

The goals of this action research project are to define engagement and how engagement is developed, how leaders are engaging employees who are geographically dispersed from their leaders, and to identify what tools and/or theories are available that support the development of engagement. Secondly, I will assess the core differences between the leaders and environments

of four teams in effort to understand the challenges surrounding engagement, development and connectivity of leadership and team members.

Upon completing my research, I will create an action plan to be implemented as part of an ongoing process which will continue to evolve and grow. Its purpose will be to increase engagement for employees working on geographically dispersed teams. I also anticipate that this action plan will increase the perception of inclusion and also have a positive impact to employee morale.

This research focuses on four distinctly different teams. Each team has a unique dynamic due to its geographic location, population, responsibilities and leadership structure. They all are responsible for creating a safe and secure environment through physical security programs and leadership within a corporate headquarters environment.

Location A is the main headquarters location located in a large downtown area within the upper Midwest. Location A consists of 12,000 contractors and employees and is responsible for global operations for the entire organization. All business units report into this central location through a traditional structure which includes the CEO and leadership committee members.

The Security manager at this location (Alpha) is responsible for 15 company employees and 25 contractors. Bravo has been with the company for 10 years and in a leadership role for 3 years; 1.5 years in the current leadership position at Location "A". Alpha has aspirations to change roles as soon as possible but no opportunities currently exist in the area of interest.

Location B is located 10 miles from Location "A" just north of the metropolitan area. Location B consists of 6000 contractors and employees and is responsible for information technology and

operational support for the entire organization. Although some senior leadership is present at this location they do not report to a central leader within the building. All employees report into leadership committee members at Location "A".

The Security manager at this location (Bravo) is responsible for 15 company employees and 35 contractors. Bravo has been with the company for 21 years and in a leadership role for 9 years; 4.5 years in the current leadership position at Location "B". Bravo has aspirations to change roles in effort to expand development and growth opportunities and experience something different. Bravo is seeking a role which will play to specific strengths that they have demonstrated in prior roles, but has not identified a move at this time and is not actively seeking an exit strategy.

Location C is located 1300 miles from Location "A" in the Southwest United States. Location "C" consists of 800-1000 contractors and employees and is primarily responsible for call center support and credit card production but also includes additional operations that support its geographic location. Lower level leadership is present at this location, but all report to different senior leaders located in multiple buildings within the enterprise and then into leadership committee members at Location "A".

The Security manager at this location (Charlie) is responsible for 5 company employees and 10 contractors. Charlie has been with the company for 18 years and in a leadership role for all 18 years; 3 years in the current leadership position at Location "C". Charlie has aspirations to move into a leadership role at Location A or B in effort to expand leadership development and growth. Charlie is currently awaiting an opportunity to become available.

Location D is located 700 miles from Location "A" in Southern Canada. Location "D" consists of 1000 contractors and employees and is the headquarters location for Canadian operations. This building is unique as it contains an entire support mechanism for Canadian operations and reports up through one senior leader charged with responsibility over Canadian operations (with exception to my team); this leader reports into the leadership committee at Location "A".

The Security manager at this location (Delta) is responsible for 6 company employees and 10 contractors. Delta has been with the company for 1 year and in a leadership role for 6 years; 1 year in the current leadership position at Location "D". Delta has aspirations to do more with the organization, however, due to the constraints within Canada will require a move outside of the current pyramid that they work in .Delta is seeking to identify a role that will afford them the opportunity to grow, but has not identified a move at this time and is not actively seeking an exit strategy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will serve as background for developing an action plan which can be applied to my current team structure. First, I will research the definition of engagement. Upon defining engagement, I will look for strategies that have been utilized to increase engagement for employees within the workplace. I will then seek information on what tools and methods that can assist with the development of engagement in geographically dispersed teams. The outcome will assist in the development of an action plan that will help to create and/or maintain engagement while long term success for the teams that I lead currently and those whom I will lead in the future.

Defining Engagement

The area of engagement is not clearly defined in terms of a specific leadership theory. However, multiple authors including Truss, Soane, Edwards, Wisdom, Croll & Burnett (2006) state that "like 'leadership', employee engagement has no universal definition, through its simplest expression is 'passion for work'." (p. 12). Gill (2011) adds to this definition by stating that "Employee engagement is the extent to which people in an organization will willingly, even eagerly, give of their discretionary effort, over and above doing what they have to do" (p. 257). Although these examples define engagement, they do not indicate how engagement occurs.

Kruse (2013) deepens the psychological rational behind engagement by stating that "Employee engagement is the emotional commitment the employee has to the organization and its goals" (p. 6). The emotional commitment that an employee has to its organization can determine how much they care about the quality of output they provide and how they feel about what they do and whom they work for which is becoming almost as important as the strategies that make the business successful. O'Daniell (1999) indicates a similar position with the suggestion that the people are what hold the key to making things happen and not the strategy inferring that soft skills are much more important.

Kahn (1990) helps to define how engagement happens by stating that it is "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (p. 694). Although it is not indicated in this suggestion, it can be determined that it is the leader's responsibility to harness emotional, physical and cognitive connectivity to achieve engagement.

People are critical to strategic success as is their engagement and dedication, but how is it created? Wang & Hsieh (2013) suggest that it is the leader that leads with strong values; integrity and the ability to motivate is the key to success. Interpersonal skills and key leadership traits have a significant impact to employee engagement. Wang & Hsieh (2013) noted that societal values like integrity and authenticity are critically important to the development of trust and engagement within the workplace. While their study showed that "the effect of employee trust on employee engagement was statistically significant" it was the ability of the leader to establish credibility through words and actions paired with a specified level of transparency that enabled an environment of trust to be built (Wang & Hsieh, 2013, p. 619). Gallup (2010) noted similar values in an article which identifies 12 core elements of great management. Within them trust, communication, development and commitment are key themes therefore supporting those of Wang & Hsieh (2013)

There may be, however, challenges with the development of trust and engagement with employees as outlined by Dávila & Piña-Ramírez (2014). In their study, Dávila & Piña-Ramírez (2014) noted that "employees decide if they want to be engaged" (p. 6). The decision for an employee to be engaged is purely a social challenge between leadership and the employee which is supported by Wang & Hsieh (2013) in that it is the relationship between employee and leadership that drives trust and engagement.

In summary, engagement is something that happens when leaders develop a personal interaction with employees; it is not given without effort. It requires leaders to engage each member of the team with strong values and integrity. Leaders must also be able to motivate a diverse group of employees and be able connect with them on a personal level. Leaders must also understand that trust is an absolute necessity. Only the employee can decide that they will

engage emotionally and connect to the organization and its leadership. However, the result is an employee who is emotionally connected, passionate and willing to go above and beyond physically and emotionally for the organization and its leaders.

Strategies for Developing Engagement

Dávila & Piña-Ramírez (2014) suggest that career development, incentives and performance management are also elements to developing engagement with employees. However, they also mention in their research that being connected to the organizational image (made up of brand and strategy) is also very important as employees seek to align themselves to the brand that an organization creates. This brand connectivity and loyalty is significant within my experiences at my current employer and trumps most other initiatives.

Based on research, what strategies are being used to create the level engagement desired in the workplace by employees? O'Daniell (1999) builds upon the need for communication and brand connectivity by noting that soft issues such as culture and values are becoming just as if not more important within the workplace than the traditional structure of business. Because of this shift in the needs of the employee, companies are seeking new ways of working to include work-at-home arrangements and job sharing so that the employee can feel as if the personal needs that they have are being supported by the organization. This shift establishes connectivity to the brand and thus creates engagement by personalizing the job to the worker. However, O'Daniell (1999) also discusses the caution surrounding the need for communication with these strategies as employees can begin to feel disconnected, and suggests that "Clear and frequent communication from the top makes employees feel as though they are a part of the process" (p. 20)

8

A white paper by FORUM for People Performance Management and Measurement ([FORUM], 2010) suggests the development and implementation of employee enrichment programs that emphasize the quality of employee lives outside of the physical workplace. In addition, providing development in simple areas such as development and special training can provide great incentives that genuinely add to the quality of people's lives and act as a tool to attract the best talent possible. FORUM (2010) argues that "Enrichment provides superior opportunities to foster not just the quality of the work environment for better business performance, but for a richer life with personal well-being as the goal" (p. 3).

A key to a better life for many people is often a result of attaining positions that each of us desire. However, for us to attain these roles often requires development within and outside of the workplace. According to Jett & Hollander (1987), development is cyclical, but key for building a strategy that will eventually qualify you for the job that people desire. The *Doom Loop* (Jett & Hollander, 1987) is a process which takes into account the different quadrants or phases that an employee might encounter when moving throughout a position. In an ideal situation the employee develops over time to be effective and satisfied with the role that they play. As time moves on, the employee may become bored with the position and require new projects or development opportunities that can reinvigorate them. However, as time moves on an employee may grow increasing frustrated and/or bored with the position (regardless of the efforts to reinvigorate them). If left unattended or unchallenged that employee can become miserable and potentially detrimental to the team. This can result in an employee leaving the company on their terms or the company's. Understanding and communicating openly with each team member on development is crucial to maintaining health and engagement within the team.

Relationships are another area identified as another skill in creating an engaging workplace environment. In a study by Gallup Consulting (2010) the importance of positive workplace relationships is noted. Crabtree (2004) also suggests that positive workplace relationships are essential as employees spend an even greater share of time within the workplace when work from home strategies are not able to be employed. Crabtree (2004) also suggests that negative relationships are "detrimental to an organization's functioning" (p. 7). Forck (2014) suggests that leaders work on the establishment of personal connection with each employee because it is incredibly important to the success of the organization. He suggests taking the time to create a personal connection with employees through something as simple as handwritten cards for employees on their birthday or a personal note to say thanks for an extra effort.

Wagner & Harter (2006) list twelve elements that employees consider to be essential for providing great management. These key elements were derived from an interview with over 1 million people and hundreds of questions which were assessed by a select group of social scientists. These social scientists determined which elements were "most powerful in explaining workers' productive motivations on the job" (Wagner & Harter, 2006, p. *xi*). As motivation can be closely associated with engagement, *The 12 Elements of Great Management* *fig. 1* shows how employees view great management. The list indicates many similarities to other areas covered within the literature review and indicate a relationship between the organization, its leadership and the employees within a business.

Fig. 1 The 12 Elements of Great Management (Wagner & Harter, 2006, p. xi)

1. I (employee) know what is expected of me at work.
2. I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.
3. I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
4. In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
5. My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
6. There is someone at work who encourages my development.
7. At work, my opinions seem to count.
8. The mission or purpose of my organization makes me feel my job is important.
9. My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.
10. I have a best friend at work.
11. In the last six months, someone at work has talked to be about my progress.
12. This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.

In summary, engagement does not occur on its own. It requires that an organization and its leadership to invest in its people in order to establish engagement. This investment includes a multitude of expectations by the employee and often includes connectivity, communication, development, and a sense of community. Without a dedicated effort in these critical areas, any progress made with engagement in the early stages of remote team engagement can be lost. Therefore these elements are critical for long term success with engagement.

Tools and Technologies for Managing Geographically Dispersed Teams

With the challenges associated with geographic dispersion, technology is quickly becoming the tool of choice for connectivity. El-Tayeh & Gil (2007) provide a summary of communication techniques used for cross-firm socialization with dispersed teams. The findings

11

show that email messaging is easy but is often littered with information overload and ambiguity. Phone calls are an improvement to the challenges associated with email, but still lack the value of a face-to-face meeting. Driskell, Radtke, & Salas (2003) and Sapsed, Gann, Marshall, & Salter (2005) support this finding by measuring importance of different means of interaction when dealing with dispersed teams. According to Sapsed et al. (2005), face-to-face meetings are preferred 86 percent of the time as opposed to email or phone communication. Driskel et al. (2003) also provides data that supports the value of this type of interaction; however, they also indicate that real time video conferencing or social presence is a close second.

Chidambaram & Jones (1993) notes that social presence is a great tool and can be utilized to help members of the group feel the actual presence of the person being communicated to. Such technologies are improving each day and offer geographically dispersed teams to sit across the table from one another virtually thus improving the chances of success. Olson G. & Olson J. (2000) supports this finding by showing that groups which engage in "collaboration and collaboration technology, have a change at succeeding with remote work" (p. 139). Additionally, they note that simple audio and a shared workspace are simply insufficient to reproduce the same quality of work that can be done when sitting in the same room. However, equally as important as the technology solutions that are put into place is the quality of the technology (i.e. Bandwidth and equipment) and training itself. If these areas are not maintained at the highest levels, frustration can often cause teams to depart from technologies that can add a tremendous amount of value that it was designed to bring to the team.

In summary, the information reviewed revealed a preference to face-to-face interpersonal communication vs. utilizing technology. However, technology can assist in bridging a physical gap but should mimic a personal interaction such as video conference. Phones and email

12

communication serves a purpose, but can provide concerns with engagement if not supported through face-to-face interaction.

Literature Review Summary

Performing the literature review has reinforced that notion that trust and engagement are earned and not given of freewill. It requires that a leader connects with each member of the team beyond the superficial. An organization and its leaders are responsible for creating a process for engagement that invests in the growth and wellbeing of everyone on the team. The organization must also understand value of community within the workplace as illustrates the importance of having a collaborative team. It must also ensure that each employee understands and is connected to the organizational vision, mission and goals and mission and provide prompt and value added communication on the company's direction and the decisions that impact them. Finally, they must embrace the value of technologies which can assist in bridging the gap created by is desire for geographic dispersion, but also embrace the idea that nothing is as valuable in the eyes of the employee than a deeper face to face connection their leadership.

FINDINGS

Interview Findings - Team

As part of my research, I elected to interview each of my team leaders. I felt that this was the best way to gain insights from their experiences and understand the frustrations that they have with the current state and history of the team. As I began my discussions with each leader,

it became clear to me that each of them had very valid concerns and also very constructive suggestions about how we might solve the challenges that exist on the team.

Each leader was provided a series of questions (see Appendix C for Subject Interview Questions) in a one-on-one interview setting. During the interviews, they were asked to respond to each question and provide additional insights on their suggestions on how we, as a leadership team, could make improvements with engagement and the leadership for remote teams. Below is a summary of my remote leadership team interviews.

The first question that I asked was if we did a good job as a team in fulfilling the company's vision on creating an environment where everyone feels welcome, valued, respected and included. Overall, the leadership team felt that our company and its leaders do a good job of creating an environment where everyone feels welcome, valued, respected and included. The examples given surrounded the company's communication tools and methods such as the company website and marketing campaigns. They also made reference to my efforts to connect with the team personally which was noted as an area of strength.

I then asked if the team had any frustrations with connectivity / engagement / inclusion with Location "A". The team indicated that they indeed felt engaged through communication at formal meetings and email communication which includes news, feedback and recognition for performance. They also mentioned the value of weekly calls as a global team.

I then asked each leader about frustrations and perceptions about being treated different than the team at Location "A". The responses indicated that inclusion and recognition for services associated to high profile project and event support is a notable frustration with remote teams. Because of its geography, Location "A" has the opportunity to support a number of high

profile security initiatives to include celebrity VIP visitors, special events/performances, investigations, and protest activity. Additionally, they also have an increased opportunity to meet and interact with leadership committee members as they reside in Location "A", which creates a perception that they also receive increased visibility.

During the interviews, many of the remote team leaders also indicated that they have the perception that they receive limited visibility and recognition as compared to Location "A". They mentioned that the opportunity and visibility of projects managed at Location "A" are often recognized and that the efforts occurring at their facilities is often overshadowed. Although this limited visibility is often created due to urgency, resource locality or poor communication, the perception still exists.

In addition to challenges surrounding recognition, all three leaders mentioned that the challenges around communication has resulted in the exclusion of key inputs not being included and can directly impact the remote teams that it was designed to help. Such is the understanding of how a new program may impact Canadian business operations which is sometimes regulated by a government entity and has to remain different. Regardless of the cause, this finding is very concerning for me being a leader of remote teams.

Remote team members encounter different challenges and want to feel as if they are on an even playing field. Although each team is unique, team members often feel that because they are not included in these projects or events that they are less likely to be recognized as high profile opportunity often overshadows that of remote teams.

Since my arrival on the team, we have been working to resolve some of the identified connectivity issues through the use of technology such as video conferencing, audio

15

conferencing and instant messaging. These tools in tandem with scheduled calls with senior leadership support a better understanding of the business and allows for the team to engage with leadership on the challenges they are facing. In addition, intentional visits on a quarterly basis are seen as a positive experience that generates connectivity and trust.

Last is the subject of team building inclusion amongst teams. Executive committee leadership residing at Location "A" will, at times, sponsor team building events such as free lunch, breakfast or desserts (ice cream etc.) and notify it through a mailing list via email. Although all teams are included in this email, remote teams often do not receive the same treatment which causes employees to feel as they are not included or as important as those residing at Location "A". A solution to this concern is currently being facilitated in an ad-hoc manner by providing funding for events out of my budget.

Overall the results from the interviews show a strong correlation to each other and highlight areas that are strengths and opportunities from a team perspective. It is also clear that having strong leaders at each of these facilities enables them to shield much of what frustrates the leaders directly given that they do not share it with their direct reports.

Interview Findings - Leadership

In addition to asking questions about the team as a whole, I also spent time discussing individualized questions with each of them. My first objective for these questions was to understand better their frustrations with their current status a remote team leader. Secondly, I wanted to determine if any of my findings from the literature review were present.

All three remote team leaders indicated a desire for changes to their current roles. The two leaders with the most time in position (Bravo and Charlie) shared with me that they desire to move into a role in which they are more challenged and intellectually stimulated. With an understanding on where these leaders stand developmentally, it is critically important that they be challenged and that I work on developmental growth with them as they approach a stage in the *Doom Loop* (Jett & Hollander, 1987) at which they could become less engaged as leaders and possibly impact the teams they lead in a negative way.

All three leaders stated that they would like to see a change in their formal title as they do not feel that their current title reflect the responsibilities and scope of work that they do. Additionally, they feel that their title creates challenges when attempting to partner with or influence leadership on decisions despite the level that they operate. This has been a concern that I have encountered throughout my career in the organization as many positions within our company are not representative and do not reflect the true scope of responsibilities that each leader has. Although I will surface these concerns to leadership and human resources, it is highly unlikely that they will change in the current structure of the team until additional changes are addressed with the structure of the organization.

One of the final things that each of them provided feedback on was the importance of physical site visits from senior leadership and the opportunity to visit senior leadership at Location "A". They felt that this has been a positive change since my joining the team. The team expressed to me that technology helps to fill the gap, but having a physical interaction is very important. They all feel that engagement they experience is at its highest during these key periods of time because they feel personally connected to leadership and to the mission.

17

Personal Assessment

Each of my leaders and their teams had very similar concerns around engagement and connectivity. Each of these team leaders also has a similar degree of frustration with the perceived preferential engagement with Location "A". After reflecting on my research and the interviews with the team, I began to understand that the frustration was created not by distance, but by the environmental makeup of the headquarters environment itself.

Location "D", although in a different country, has an entire headquarters, organization residing within the same physical building. Because of this environmental makeup they do not feel as disconnected from the mission the organization. They also feel that more opportunities have presented themselves to foster a team environment and to participate in team building initiatives provided by the organization and its leadership. Although, some of the connectivity challenges with Location "A" still exist, the team appears to be more engaged in the company itself.

Location "C" has different challenges. This team is much further away than Location "D" and has a very limited headquarters environment in terms of complexity and leadership presence. However, because they do not see many of the offerings that Location "A" has and/or understand that the environment that they reside in is different and will never be similar, they do not feel entitled to them. Many of the employees that are in this facility are content with the environment, and appear engaged. The connectivity challenges with Location "A" still exist; the team appears to be content but wanting to feel included in other things such as strategy.

Location "B" has the perfect storm of challenges. They are very close to Location "A" geographically but feel like they are hundreds of miles away. The team feels entitled to many of

the same opportunities and the visibility that Location "A" has. They might say that they understand why they might be treated differently as the location serves a different purpose, but they feel that because they are not Location "A" that they are inferior and are not as important. This team needs significant work with engagement because of this reason alone, but also because of the lack of organizational structure and opportunity.

All locations have challenges with career development and growth. Historically, the organization has built the perception that employees should only be in a role for 12-18 months prior to promoting into a new role. Because some of my employees have been in role for 48 months, they are becoming increasingly frustrated with their lack of career progression and promotional opportunities. Unfortunately, there are multiple challenges with this situation. First, the current business environment is in the midst of change due to the economic climate. The notion of 12-18 months in position prior to another opportunity is becoming 24-36 months. Additionally, our team structure does not support a good career path for entry level employees to promote within the team leaving the only option to find another role. This is a known issue, but one that is currently being looked into for solutions.

Regardless of the rationale, these are significant frustrations for the team and some, who are currently the highest performing, are at risk of the miserable stage within the *Doom Loop* (Jett & Hollander, 1987). If this is not addressed, they will leave. The highest performing employees will leave my organization for one that has a defined career path, or for another company for a different opportunity. My lower performing employees will remain to train new employees. This less tenured and engaged population could result in a less professional and less productive environment if not resolved.

In summary, my interviews with the team confirmed many of the concepts discussed in the literature review. Sapsed et al. (2005) in which face-to-face meetings are preferred as opposed to email or phone communication. They also confirmed the concepts listed by O'Daniell (1999) in which "Clear and frequent communication from the top makes employees feel as though they are a part of the process" (p. 20).Unfortunately it also brings to light concerns around the need for a defined career path and developmental roadmap as illustrated by the *Doom Loop* by Jett & Hollander (1987).

The interviews have illustrated areas of strength and areas of opportunity which need to be addressed within my action plan.

ACTION PLAN

Based on the information that I have identified through the literature review as well as personal assessment at the interview of the team, I will take the following actions and determine a secondary assessment to determine what changes are needed going forward to address the concerns surrounding engagement.

1. Site Visits

I will schedule physical on-site visits to each of my remote sites. These visits will begin immediately and continue on a quarterly basis by remote leadership (at minimum). Going forward these meetings will be scheduled at the beginning of fiscal year and communicated to the team so that they know and are prepared well in advance. This will enable me to begin the process of connecting with each remote team member personally and supports the concept by

Sapsed et al. (2005) in which face-to-face meetings are preferred as opposed to email or phone communication. During these visits, I will seek an overview of building operations and spend a tremendous amount of time getting to know the team better. Establishing this connectivity is critical. In addition, I will seek out opportunities to have individualized developmental discussions.

2. Strategic Meetings

Remote site leadership will also be required to travel to Location "A" for collaborative meetings with peer remote leaders, senior leadership and myself on a quarterly basis. Ideally, this cadence should occur during a separate month of the quarter than the leadership visit. This serves a number of purposes. First it enables all leaders to connect on remote leadership challenges while also providing the ability to collaborate on projects which have site specific requirements. It also illustrates the concept by O'Daniell (1999) in which "Clear and frequent communication from the top makes employees feel as though they are a part of the process" (p. 20).

On a weekly basis, I will have a conference call with the team to share project updates and activities globally. This will help to provide transparency on what each leader is working on while also offering an opportunity to raise questions or concerns. Also included in these calls will be recognition for employees that have gone above and beyond.

3. Team Building

Extend executive leadership team building initiatives to remote locations. In the event that an event is advertised or communicated, leadership should ensure that remote teams are included in the provisions as indicated. Leadership should advocate for remote teams to ensure

that remote teams are budgeted for accordingly. Meetings will be scheduled to advocate for their inclusion.

4. Leveraging Technology

On months that I am not visiting remote sites, I will utilize video conference technologies to connect with the team and perform a pulse check with them to see how things are going and to determine if there are frustrations or concerns that need to be addressed. This will carry forward the establishment of trust with the team while also engaging with them on a personal level. This also supports the concept by Driskel et al. (2003) which indicates that real time video conferencing or social presence second in value behind face-to-face interaction.

5. Recognition

I will also establish a recognition program for the team. Each with will determine an individual to be nominated and will be voted on monthly by leadership. The winner will receive a plaque that will be signed by myself and other leaders recognizing them for their efforts. In addition, all nominations will be shared in a formal meeting once per month.

In addition to formal recognition, I will seek opportunity to write personalized notes for birthdays and special thanks to each member of the team. As Forck (2014) suggests, the establishment of personal connection with each employee is critical and suggests that this personal effort to write a note goes a long way and can be utilized to build rapport with the team.

6. *Structure and Career Path*

I will also continue to advocate for a better defined structure and career path both with my direct reports and their employee population. Dávila & Piña-Ramírez (2013) suggest that career development, incentives and performance management are also elements to developing engagement with employees, and as illustrated by the *Doom Loop* (Jett & Hollander, 1987) is critical to an engaged and productive team.

Action Plan Summary

The goal of my action plan is to implement key findings based on the information that I have identified through the literature review as well as personal assessment obtained during the interview of the team. I will utilize the action plan as an outline to be used in the development of goals and objectives to which I will measure my success on through the year. This measurement will be taken in partnership with my leadership and my direct reports. I hope that the efforts made in this project will better the engagement within my current organizational structure and those which I will have in the future regardless of their physical proximity to me.

Once implemented, this action plan will be reviewed after an initial 90 day pilot to determine if adjustments will be required. Once finalized, this action plan will be revisited annually for assessment of engagement levels as well as further changes and/or adjustments. The goal of this plan is not to remain stagnant, but to be a living/breathing approach to developing engagement with remote teams.

CONCLUSIONS

This research provides a framework for developing team engagement with geographically dispersed teams. The concepts can also lend themselves to the development of engagement within a single environment as they illustrate the importance of face-to-face interaction.

As with most studies, my research is not without limitation. As technology continues to evolve and society continues to change, I predict that some of the research findings and action planning may not apply. As Chidambaram & Jones (1993) indicated in 1993 that social presence is a great tool, today might say that it is an essential tool and tomorrow could say that virtual environments are the wave of the future. One cannot predict where technology will enable us to go as we also cannot predict what the next generation of youth will require for engagement.

I will continue utilize this research as a basis to improve the challenges that I experience in my role. Its framework will help me to better assess engagement going forward in my career.

The world is in constant change as is business. As the organizations that I will work for in the future continue to strive for enhanced profitability, I will need to continually look beyond for new ways to engage my teams with incentives designed to increase performance levels regardless of chaotic economic pressures and cultural shifts.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Special IRB Approval

Students Name: Craig A Dischinger

Proposed Title of Project: Remote Employee Engagement

Description of your project:
The goal of this research project is to understand the challenges of leading remote teams and create a process to increase team member engagement for remote teams.

Nature of Subjects/Participants:
Interview 3 leaders of remote teams within the security pyramid at Target

Will you be studying any special populations:
No

How will you recruit participants:
Participants will include my current direct reports for my current roles and responsibilities. They consist of global remote team leadership.

Special IRB Application for ML 588 under Dr. Noonan's Approval # 2014-08-4

This simplified form will be used only because there is master approval for this course

Appendix B

Subject Consent Form

Creating Remote Team Engagement

You are invited to participate in a research study regarding remote team and team member engagement. You are being asked to be a possible participant because you are: (1) located at a remote headquarters facility; (2) lead a team; and (3) experience challenges with connectivity at the Minneapolis MN headquarters population. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study

This study is being conducted by Craig A Dischinger, as part the degree requirements for obtaining a Master's Degree in Leadership Studies at Augsburg College and in cooperation with the Target Corporation at which I am currently employed. My advisor is Norma Noonan, Ph.D.

Procedures:
If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to complete a brief discussion with me for one hour either in person or via phone. I will ask you numerous questions related to this research topic. I will take notes and, if granted permission, will audio tape our meeting for later recall of our discussion.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
The risks to participation are low but may include personal or sensitive information obtained during out meeting.

Participants will not receive any direct benefits. However, as a result of this study a leadership method will be created and be applied to remote teams.

Indirect benefits: Leaders may benefit from the findings of this study by understanding the challenges surrounding leadership of remote teams as they relate to engagement.
Leaders may utilize the findings in effort promote leader self-awareness and to better connect with remote team members.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept confidential, unless required by law. All data will be kept in a locked file and only my advisor Norma Noonan, Ph.D. and I will have access to the data and any tape recordings. The results will be disseminated in a final paper and presented to the MA Leadership program at Augsburg College. The paper will be placed in the Lindell Library. The results also may be published in a professional journal or at local, regional, national, or international conferences via a poster or oral presentation. In any form of dissemination, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. You may withdraw from the study at any time. During the interview you may skip any questions you do not want to answer. If granted permission, direct quotes may be used, but a pseudonym, rather than your actual name will be used. All other identifying information will be changed to protect your

identity. Despite these precautions, absolute anonymity cannot be guaranteed due to the small number to be interviewed. I will be transcribing the audio recordings. Transcriptions and audio recordings will be kept in a locked file and only my advisor and I will have access to them. The Augsburg faculty will be provided with a paper and/or electronic copy of this report. A copy of the final report will be in print and accessible at the Augsburg College Library. In addition, I may present the results at a graduate student colloquium and/or educational conferences.

Any tape recordings will be destroyed after the required-three-year time frame. All raw data will be destroyed by June 11, 2017 following federal guidelines which specifies a minimum of 3 years for retention of data.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with your current employer, Augsburg College or Craig A Dischinger, the researcher. If you decide to participate, you are free to skip questions in the interview or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:
You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me, Craig A Dischinger at 612-695-0109 or disching@augsburg.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Norma Noonan, Ph.D., at 612-330-1198 or noonan@augsburg.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or want to discuss problems/complaints about the research study, send an e-mail to IRB@augsburg.edu.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information or have had it read to me. I have received answers to questions asked. *I consent to participate in the study.*

Subject Printed Name_____

Subject Signature _____   Date_____

Investigator Printed Name_____

Investigator Signature _____   Date_____

I consent to be audio-taped

Subject Signature _____   Date _____

I consent to allow use of my direct quotations

Subject Signature _____   Date_____

A3

Appendix C

Subject Interview Questions

As discussed thought my time here in Corporate Security Services we have discussed the opportunities that surround the engagement of remote teams. For the following questions, thing about the challenges that you have with the connectivity of your team to the headquarters facility in Minneapolis, MN as well as the leadership residing there.

1. Our company strives to create an environment where everyone feels welcome, valued, respected and included. Do you feel we do a good job of this?

2. What are your frustrations that you have with connectivity / engagement / inclusion with the teams in MN?

3. Similarly, what frustrations does your team have with connectivity / engagement / inclusion?

4. Do you currently have tools or resources available to you to drive engagement with your remote team?

5. Why do you think teams feel disconnected from the Plaza team?

6. Do you feel that your team receives equal treatment as other teams?

7. Do you feel that your team receives equal recognition as other teams?

8. Do you feel that your team has same priority as other teams?

Individual

1. Tell me about a time when you felt most connected to leadership and the CSS mission.

2. Why do you believe you felt this way?

3. What made the engagement work at that time?