The Influence of Servant Leadership on Employee Turnover Intention: Employees Want to Be Heard

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Employee turnover is expensive. This qualitative single-case study examined the effectiveness of the servant leadership characteristic of listening concerning employee turnover intention in the manufacturing industry. The study sampled seventy randomly selected employees from a cross section of a manufacturing plant from each generation using a structured five-point Likert scale questionnaire. Findings suggest the servant leadership characteristic of listening is critical to reducing employee turnover intention in millennials in this industry. Employees wanted to be listened to, cared about, and for leaders to consider their opinions. Servant leaders practice listening, inclusion in decision-making, and development of employees.

Keywords: servant leadership, employee turnover intention, millennials, workforce, management

INTRODUCTION

With long hours and other pressures in the workplace, there is a need for servant leaders that are human-focused, employee-friendly, and caring. Leaders need to make decisions that benefit their employees and prioritize them at work (Baykal, 2020). Leadership is an influence relationship between the leader and follower. Servant leaders seek to understand their followers and communicate appropriately to lead effectively. Servant leadership, although not a new concept as it dates to the 1970's, has emerged over the years as a leadership approach that focuses on follower needs and prioritizes their employees (Liden, et al., 2015). This study explored the implementation of servant leadership and its impact on turnover intention, specifically regarding millennials and managers. The single case study method was employed in conducting this research at a floor-covering facility in Northwest Georgia.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

As the workforce changes with increased globalization, technology, competition, and even shifting generations, the way work is performed has changed. One topic of concern for leaders involves different

generations in the workforce (Heyns & Kerr, 2018). This shift has been exponential in the manufacturing arena, and the need to maintain middle-skilled workers is imperative (Gould, 2019). As a result, organizations such as in the manufacturing industry during changing times need to determine what leadership principles and practices need to be implemented to maintain these workers.

This study examined an organization in the Northwest Georgia floor covering industry with many competitors, increasing the need to retain their current workforce. Employee retention is a key challenge in this industry. It is estimated that turnover intention in this industry can cost as much as $10,000 per person who chooses to leave it. Organizations in this industry want to mitigate these costs. Leadership principles, turnover intention, and the millennial workforce must be further studied to see the relationship between these factors. This problem can be improved. Servant leadership principles could provide insights to the organization in retaining millennials and managers in this industry.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In general, a lack of understanding of servant leadership in the manufacturing industry results in employee turnover intention. Many studies have shown the relationship between general differences in leadership and employees as a key reason that employees leave their job (Skelton, Nattress, and Dwyer, 2019; Kashyap & Rangnekar, 2016). Millennials expect leaders to understand their needs and wants within a job. Leadership styles often impact employee satisfaction levels (Saleh, O'Connor, Al-Subhi, & Patton, 2018). Leader attitudes and behaviors influence employees (Tugut, Bekmezci, & Ates, 2017). One study by Thacker, Sullivan, and Self (2019), examined leadership concerning turnover in a waste management company and called for additional studies in other industries. High turnover can reduce the financial success of an organization.

PURPOSE STATEMENT

This qualitative research study aimed to examine the effectiveness of servant leadership principles in relation to employee turnover intention in the manufacturing industry. This research will assist managers in leading millennials and allow managers to see how they can have a more productive relationship with their employees which can help to reduce turnover intention. In conducting the research several research questions were considered to provide a framework for conducting the research.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The business world is changing rapidly and the role of leaders is being redefined by this relationship between change and the employee work environment. Globalization, technology, and other norms influence the workplace (Ramsey et al., 2016; Hagberg, 2016). This research was focused on the relevance of servant leadership and how these principles were explored in the manufacturing industry as it related to turnover intention and impacts millennials and managers. Several research questions were utilized in this study:

Research Question 1. How does executing servant leadership principles impact turnover intention among Millennials in manufacturing?

Research Question 2. How does the execution of servant leadership principles impact turnover intention of management in manufacturing?

Research Question 3. What impact would be gained by incorporating servant leadership principles into a manufacturing company's management style?

Due to numerous factors, there has been an increase in employee turnover intention at this floor covering organization. This research explored the implementation of servant leadership and its impact on

employee turnover intention specifically as it relates to retaining both millennials and managers. In utilizing these research questions, a review of the current literature was conducted in relation to leadership theories such as servant leadership, motivation, and millennials in the workplace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of academic and professional literature was conducted. Leaders set the tone of the organization and influence employee outcomes, but employees must be willing to follow the leader (Fillol, Lohmann, Turcotte-Tremblay, Some, & Riddle, 2019). Leadership consists of many elements including listening skills (Koya, Anderson, & Sice, 2018) and communication in general (Mulenga, Nzala, & Mutale, 2018). First, in reviewing the literature servant leadership was examined. Then, the research related to the cost of turnover was explored. Finally, a review of any studies relating to millennials and managers in the workplace were reviewed.

Leadership is important to business success (Gottfredson & Reina, 2020). Leaders have power and their effectiveness measures it as a leader (Greenleaf et al, 1996). Leaders influence their employees and employees are motivated to make sure their basic needs are met. Leaders who have a good relationship with their employees can create a greater sense of belonging (Senda, 2018) if they understand employee needs which will improve productivity and reduce employee intention to leave. Employees want to be heard and they want leaders that will listen to them. Greenleaf (1996) suggests that servant leaders listen to their employees, creating a bond. He also suggests that "the future can be radically altered by the kinds of people now being prepared for the future, "so millennials are an important part of the workforce as a flooring company. Servant leaders can have a substantial impact on employees and on their performance, commitment, satisfaction, and turnover intentions (Inceoglu et al., 2018; Oreg & Berson, 2019; Eva et al., 2019; Hoch et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020). Research on the relationship of servant leadership to organizational outcomes can lead to favorable outcomes in the workplace.

Servant Leadership

Greenleaf (1977) discussed the principles of servant leadership to include several attributes: altruistic calling, empowering and developing others, being authentic, acting ethically, expressing humility, providing direction, stewardship, courage, accountability, interpersonal acceptance, leadership and builds a community. An altruistic calling is a desire from within the leader to make a difference in the lives of others (Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2015). They put the needs of others first (Flynn, Smith, & Walker, 2016; Dames, 2017). Servant leaders empower and develop others by coaching employees (Huang, Qian, Jin, & Wang, 2018), allowing them to make and learn from mistakes, and by listening to their followers (Flynn, Smither, & Walker, 2016).

Servant leaders act as role models for their employees while maintaining awareness of the needs within the organization. They are committed to empowering and helping employees succeed (Reinke, 2004). Humility is exhibited by showing appreciation for employees and their contribution (Qian et al, 2018). Humble leaders are often approachable (Stith-Flood, 2018) and could connect with others around them. Servant leaders are authentic in that they are consistent in words and actions (Debebe, 2017). Servant leaders contribute to positive job attitudes, employee self-confidence, satisfaction, trust, productivity, and performance (Van Dierendonck, 2015; Baykal et al., 2018). Servant leaders are good stewards for their employees, organizations, and communities (Hendrikz & Engelbrecht, 2019; Shek & Li, 2015; Magenzi, 2015). They are willing to take risks (Sinnicks, 2018) investigate problems, and find solutions (Mallen, Dominguez-Escrig, Chiva, & Papiedra, 2020) while also creating community (Allen, 2016).

Ten characteristics of servant leaderships that can be derived from Greenleaf's (1977) work as identified by Spears (2004) are:

- Listening – Listening intently, being accessible, and responsive to employees.
- Empathy – Being able to understand and have empathy for others.
- Healing – Being there to help heal emotional hurts.

- Awareness – Having awareness of self and others.
- Persuasion – Being able to influence others.
- Conceptualization – Ability to conceptualize ideas and communicate them.
- Foresight – Learning from the past and moving forward with a vision of the future.
- Stewardship – Serving others and stewarding them.
- Commitment to Growth of People – Helping employees grow.
- Building Community – Creating commitment trust, and a culture of community in the workplace.

All of these characteristics have been discussed in this literature to form a picture of servant leadership. This study will focus on the first characteristic of listening specifically. Servant leadership theory suggests that leaders entrenched in serving those that they lead helps to build strong bonds with their followers whom in turn are more committed to the organization (Haque, Fernando, & Caputi, 2019; Thacker, 2018). Servant leaders build relationships with their employees through communication. Listening is a key leadership skill that is not addressed in other leadership theories. Servant leaders listen, have interpersonal acceptance in that they prioritize the needs of their employees, and facilitate dialogue with them (Luu, 2017; Magezi, 2015; Mukonoweshuro, Sanangura, & Munapo, 2016). They listen to their followers and build rapport (Meng, 2016). Servant leaders create a positive organizational culture (Kashyap & Rangnekar, 2015). Servant leaders influence employee motivation, provide direction, and empowerment (Shukla, Singh, Rai, & Bhattacharya, 2018). To serve others, leaders must understand what motivates them.

Cost of Turnover

A significant problem in organizations today is high turnover. These turnover rates sometimes span from 60% to 300%. Even though some turnover intention is inevitable it can create extensive financial burdens. Different estimates exist regarding the cost of turnover. One manufacturing company report turnover intention cost them $5,500 (Huizinga, Davis, Gerr, & Ferthke, 2019) related to just the hiring and training costs. Other estimates suggest that turnover can be 90 to 200% of the existing employee's salary (Richard, McKray, Garg, and Pustovit, 2019). Retaining and motivating employees can be critical to success and create a competitive advantage (Nadiri & Tanova, 2010; Davidson, Timi, & Wang, 2010).

Millennials and Management

Generation Y, known as millennials, born between 1980's and 2000's, have been considered the youngest group of employees. It could be argued that this group represents over 50% of the employees and represents the future of the workplace. So, this group urgently needs to gain organizational commitment and reduce turnover intention (Hassan et al., 2022; Larasati, 2019; Valenti, 2019). Organizational managers need to use leadership styles that meet the expectations of millennial employees.

Scholars suggest that servant leadership is the best approach to leading this group in diverse types of organizations (Wong & Davey, 2007) but there seems to be sparse research on the topic of servant leadership's influence on millennials in the workplace (Hassan et al., 2022). Millennials want leaders who display a caring attitude, are people-oriented, reward innovation, tolerate mistakes, and value independence and creativity. They also want leaders who include them in decision-making, who listen to their ideas, they want to receive feedback, and praise. They want to be valued and respected (Wong & Davey, 2007; Easton & Steyn, 2022, Hassan et al., 2022). Satisfied and appreciated millennial employees are less likely to leave the organization. Organizational leaders must be cognizant of the need for servant leadership as part of their overall strategy to retain millennials in the workplace (Hassan et al., 2022). In summary, the research on servant leadership, research about the cost of turnover intention, and past research on millennials in the workplace each relate to this research.

This study seeks to reduce the gap in the literature that currently exists. Quite a bit of research has been conducted on servant leadership but not as it relates to the implications on the reduction of turnover intention of Millennials in a manufacturing setting. This study focused on the implementation of servant

leadership by leaders in manufacturing to reduce turnover intention and specifically as it relates to millennials and other generations in the workplace. Thacker (2018) calls for more research.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative single-case study method. Qualitative research is best for complex research, and the study of leadership is best represented through this method when the study deals with attitudes and behaviors (Graca & Passos, 2015). This study will examine the impact of servant leadership on turnover intention and qualitative research is appropriate for this study. The research data is processed using methods of systemization, categorization, and interpretation (Janasik, Honkela, & Bruun, 2009).

The single-case study method is appropriate to gain a real-life context of the problem (Yin, 2018) within an organization. This approach allows the researcher to select a case and explain how the case illustrates the problem (Creswell, 2016). This study examines the principles of servant leadership and turnover intention in a single manufacturing company.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher plays a key role, and the research must be free from bias (Althubaiti, 2016) and design, conduct, and analyze the data in a manner that is free from bias. The researcher prepared questions, used a random selection method, gathered data from different generations, gathered data from a diverse workforce, and maintained the research in electronic and paper format. Management received approval and a plan was developed to obtain the data through a Google Form. The researcher gathered data from various sources.

POPULATION AND SAMPLING

The research was conducted at one manufacturing plant in Northwest, Georgia. The makeup of the employees at this plant includes about 60% Hispanic, 39% American, and 1% other. The use of Google survey was used to collect most of the information. The study sampled about seventy employees, which is around 10% of the total employees at this location. The participants were randomly selected from a cross-section of the plant from each type of generation in the workforce with different years of experience, and different native languages. The number was selected to provide a good representation of the plant population and the ability to interview these participants was made possible via technology using Google Forms. Participants were chosen regardless of race, gender, generation, shift, department, job, or tenure with the organization.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection is an important part of the research process. A questionnaire with structured questions using a five-point Likert scale was utilized which is a widely chosen survey tool in data collection (Chyung, Roberts, Swanson, & Hankinson, 2017) in qualitative research to measure competence in managerial roles (Chen, cook, Du, Hu, & Zhu, 2015). A survey was utilized to limit social contact to decrease the chance of spreading COVID-19 as well. Participates were allowed to provide comments with each question. Key themes were noted from these comments.

Instrumentation

A survey with twenty statements was used to relate to the qualities of leaders (See Appendix A). Several statements pointed to some key principles of servant leadership and listening to and a concern for employees. The third statement related to the concept that "the leader knew the employee's name" and the sixth statement related to "the leader cares more about my success than their success" which relates to servant leadership principles of altruistic calling, empowering, and developing others, interpersonal competence and building community. The ninth statement was related to the "leader is aware of what is going on with members of their team." The sixteenth statement related to stewardship and the nineteenth

statement was "the leader listens to me when I have a concern." The research was collected using Google Forms and exported to a Google sheet for analysis and record keeping. It was maintained on the hard drive of the researcher as well as on a USB drive. It was also printed.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was coded and triangulated to establish the credibility of the data. Coding is assigning a word, short phrase, or other method to assist in interpreting data (Skjott, Linneberg, & Korsgaard, 2019). This method reduces a large amount of data into readily accessible data that can be analyzed and to make the data more usable. The researcher used several different coding methods. First, many questions were aligned to servant leadership, other questions were related to demographics to show the leadership qualities that might change due to generational or cultural difference.

Interviews and surveys from the population being studied are a good method of triangulation (Wray et al, 2016) which can add to the validity of the research. Methodological triangulation can also add validity to the research by showing that other researchers have discovered similar findings. Multiple data sources can also assist in triangulation about the subject being studied (Moon, 2019).

Reliability and Validity

A qualitative, single-case study method is a rigorous approach to research and the key feature of this type of study is the ability to repeat it because it is descriptive and not experimental (Cannon, Guardino, Antia, & Luckner, 2016). This type of research is easily relatable and transferable (Berthelsen & Holge-Hazelton, 2018). The triangulation of data, and multiple sources in the literature review was helpful in establishing validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The researcher used reflexivity in using structured interview questions completed electronically so that the researcher could not influence this part of the research. Also, all data was easily retrievable (Yin, 2018). This research used a twenty-question survey and that future researchers could use this research or related questions to establish reliability and validity. The use of bracketing, a method researchers employ to remove personal bias and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018) was also used. It should early in the research and reflexivity allows for the use of bracketing (Goldblatt & Band-Winterstein, 2016). A final use of bracketing involves having several people review the research (Wolf, 2017) which was also done.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The survey group of 70 was randomly selected from a total of 678 employees. 60 employees chose to participate. The survey was administered over a five-day period. The research resulted in several demographic variables: 75% Hispanic, 21% Caucasian (See Figure 1), 39% millennial, 32% Generation X (See Figure 2), 87% hourly (non-management) workers, 8% salary (management), and 5% that preferred not to answer the question (See Figure 3). Responds were also 61% male and 39% female (See Figure 4).

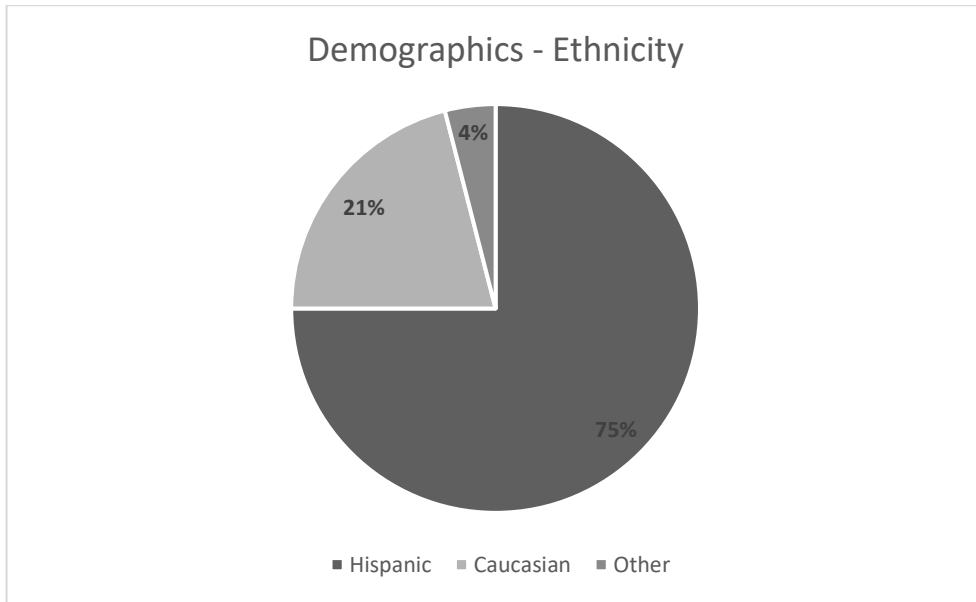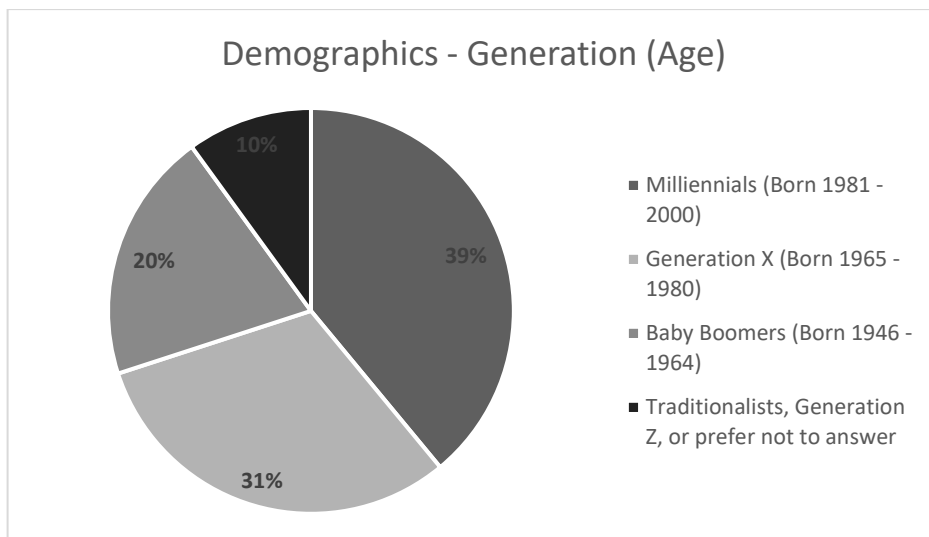**FIGURE 1**
DEMOGRAPHICS – ETHNICITY

Demographics - Ethnicity

4%

21%

75%

■ Hispanic   ■ Caucasian   ■ Other

FIGURE 2
DEMOGRAPHICS - AGE

Demographics - Generation (Age)

10%

20%

39%

31%

■ Milliennials (Born 1981 - 2000)

■ Generation X (Born 1965 - 1980)

■ Baby Boomers (Born 1946 - 1964)

■ Traditionalists, Generation Z, or prefer not to answer

FIGURE 3
DEMOGRAPHICS – MANAGEMENT VERSUS NON-MANAGEMENT

Demographics - Management versus Non-Management

8%

5%

87%

■ Hourly (Non-Management)   ■ Salary (Management)   ■ Prefer not to Answer

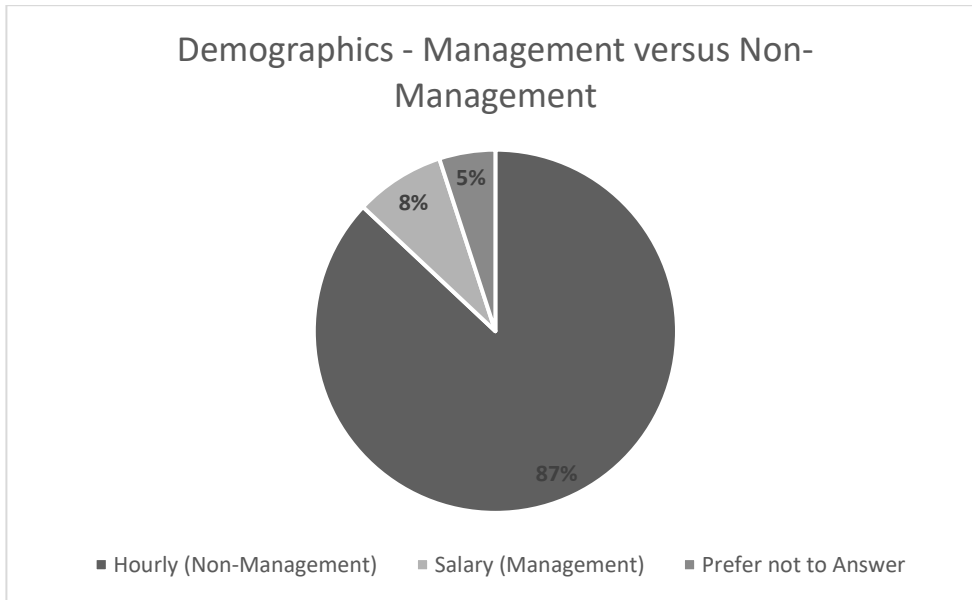**FIGURE 4**
DEMOGRAPHICS - GENDER

Demographics - Gender

39%

61%

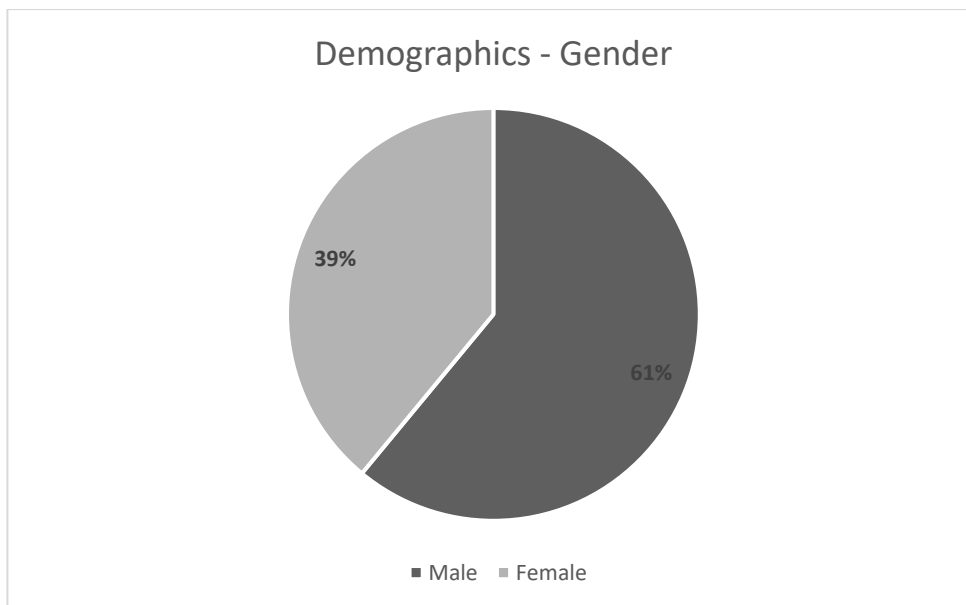■ Male   ■ Female

These demographics indicate a diverse mix of employees that participated in the survey. The survey was available in English and Spanish Translations. Both male and females were represented as well as management and non-management employees. A broad range of generations were represented. The demographics were used to sort and interpret data and its effect on the different demographics.

Listening

A theme that emerged from this research was that employees want to be heard. Another theme that emerged is that employees want leaders to know them. Listening is a critical leadership skill for successful leaders (Koya, Anderson, & Sice, 2017). Leaders must be able to listen to various perspectives, even those that are different from their own. They must allow employees to be involved in the decision or at least be heard. Employees who do not feel heard will leave (Koya, Anderson & Sice, 2017). Of the 20 statements in the survey four directly related to the servant leadership principle of listening and getting to know the employee. These four statements from the survey were used specifically and then participants' comments were collected to understand the data collected.

- Statement 1: "A leader that includes me in the decision-making process. "

  77% said this was a quality (leaders include me in decision-making) they wanted in leaders. 77% of Millennials also chose "Yes" or "I would never quit" for this statement as well (see Figure 5). Involving employees in the decision-making process can increase their satisfaction at work and build trust between the organization and employees (Orney, 2019). One strength of servant leadership is the inclusion of followers (Gaskova, 2020). Leaders that listen to employees create a sense of belonging (Carney, 2021).

FIGURE 5
STATEMENT 1
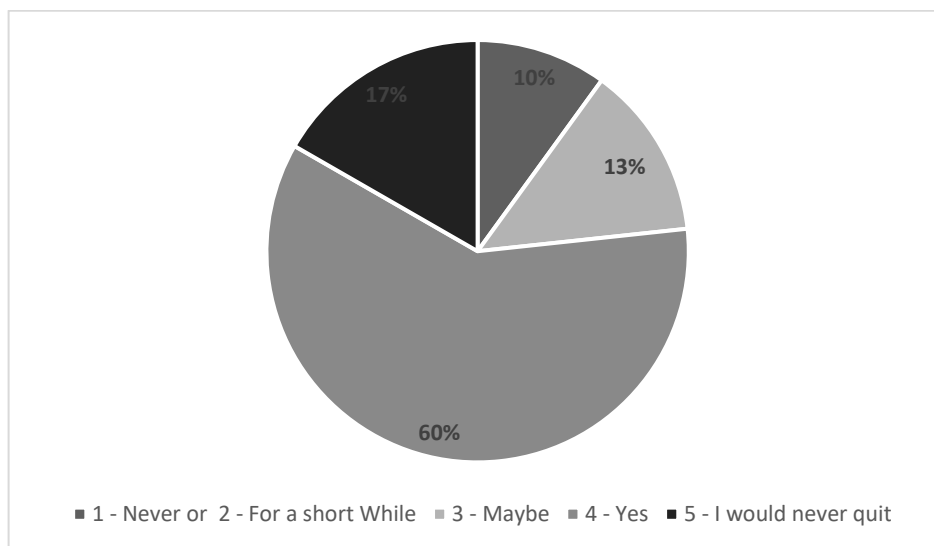
- Statement 3: "A leader that knows my name."

  In statement three, 89% of participants felt good leaders should know their name. 96% of Millennials chose "Yes" or "I would never quit" for this statement (see Figure 6). Brankovic, Zezelj, & Turjacanin (2020) suggested that knowing an employee's name creates a more inclusive work environment and is important to people. One of the best ways to get to know someone is to know their name and part of caring for someone is knowing their name.

FIGURE 6
STATEMENT 3

- 1 - Never - 2 - For a short while - 3 - Maybe - 4 - Yes - 5 - I would never quit
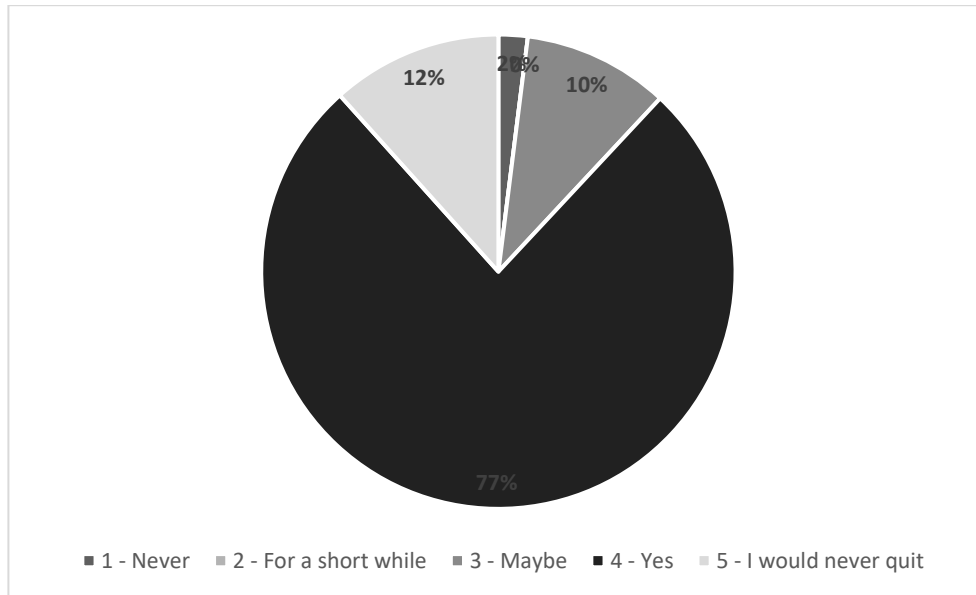
- Statement 9: "A leader that is aware of what is going on with the members of their team."
  The ninth statement of the survey related to "a leader knows what is going on with their team) and 78% of respondents agreed this would make them want to work for a particular leader and 86% of millennial workers rated this as a quality (see Figure 7). A respondent stated that "Cares about their job and the people they are working with" was an important part of this.

FIGURE 7
STATEMENT 9

- 1 - Never - 2 - For a short while - 3 - Maybe - 4 - Yes - 5 - I would never quit
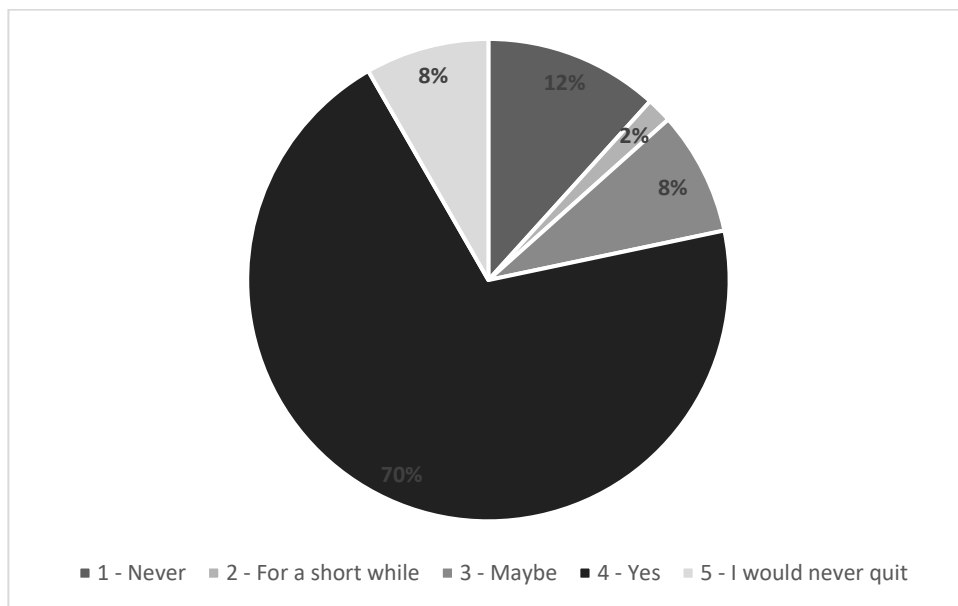
- Statement 19: "A leader that listens to me when I have a concern."

Statement nineteen was specific to the concept of "a leader listens to their employees when they have a concern," which is a defining characteristic of servant leadership (Dutta & Khatri, 2017). Listening is more than just hearing but also understanding. Leaders that listen to employees give them a sense of value (Carney, 2021).95% of millennials felt this was important (see Figure 8). A respondent also noted that leaders should "consider their opinion." The employees wanted to feel like they were listened to and part of the team instead of being dictated to. They wanted to participate and engage with their leaders. They felt that listening helped create a bond between employees and their leaders.

FIGURE 8
STATEMENT 19

Legend: ■ 1 - Never, 2 - For a short while, or 3 - Maybe   ■ 4 - Yes   ■ 5 - I would never quit
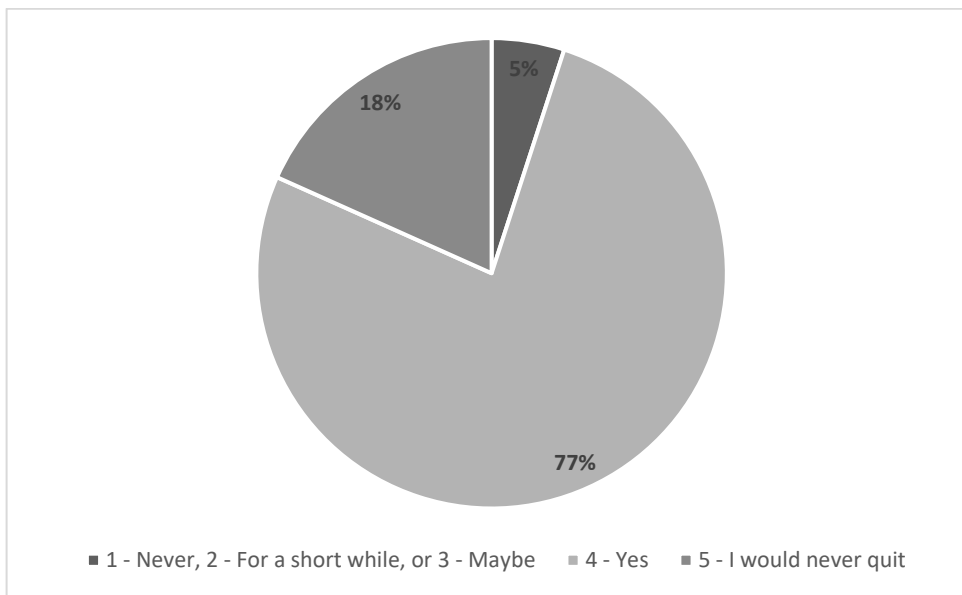
Findings from this study suggested that Servant leaders are relevant to reducing millennial turnover. According to Sendjaya et al (2017) studies have consistently shown a reduction in turnover with the use of servant leadership principles range from 5 – 28%. Servant leadership is effective in leading millennials (Borden, 2019). Servant leadership is relevant to millennials in the workplace. More millennials expressed a leader for leaders that listen, know their name, know what is happening with them, and include them in decision making than employees as a whole.

ASSUMPTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND DELIMITATIONS

There are several assumptions of this study. First, servant leadership principles resonate with millennials and they value the characteristics of servant leaders in the workplace (Gaskova, 2020). Second, People are willing to participate in research that will benefit them (Kelly, Margolis, McCormack, LeBaron, & Chowdhury, 2017). Third, people will answer honestly (Chrobot-Mason, Gerbasi, & Cullen-Lester, 2016). Fourth, servant leadership practices will reduce turnover intention (Amah & Oyetuunde, 2020). Fifth, servant leadership influences the effectiveness of the organization as these practices trickle down throughout the organization (Stollberger, Las Heras, Rofcanin, & Bosch, 2019).

This research was limited to the servant leadership theory in one organization. Participated responded to questions related to their experience within one company, A flooring company in one geographic region of Northwest Georgia. The researchers also had limited experience in conducting this type of research.

Study delimitations included research participants were chosen randomly from employees within one single manufacturing organization and the study was confined to a specific time.

SIGNIFICANCE, BENEFITS, GAPS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study sought to reduce the gaps in the servant leadership literature related to a reduction in employee turnover intention of Millennials in a manufacturing setting. The research specifically related to the principles that would improve employee and leaders' relationships. Respondents of this survey noted that they would stay with the organization even if they were not heard but there could be consequences that should be studied when employees do not feel heard.

This research benefits organizations by exploring the use of servant leadership in organizations to reduce turnover intention (Thacker, 2018). Turnover intention is extremely expensive and can present challenges for managers (Kaltiainen & Hakanen, 2022). Employees want to work for leaders that listen to them and care about them (Lu, Zhang, & Jia, 2018). Listening is critical and servant leaders listen to employees because they value them. They treat them with respect, want to see them grow, and want the organization to succeed (Kaltiainen & Hakanen, 2022). Researchers should continue to research servant leadership in different industries with different sample sizes in different geographic regions and about millennials as welll as concerning turnover intention.

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APPENDIX: SERVANT LEADERSHIP SURVEY

Please read each statement. As you read each question, think if you would want to work for the leader that is identified in the questions. Rate your answer on a 1-5 scale with 1 – being never, 2 – for a short while, 3 – may be, 4 – yes, and 5 – I would never quit.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. A leader that includes me in the decision-making process.					
2. A leader that shows an interest in my career development.					
3. A leader that knows my name.					
4. A leader that is only concerned with production.					
5. A leader that takes an interest in serving others in the community.					
6. A leader that cares more about my success than their success					
7. A leader that is honest.					
8. A leader that works to make my job easier.					
9. A leader that is aware of what is going on with the members of their team.					
10. A leader who has the ability to admit when they make a mistake					
11. A leader who has a plan and knows where they are going.					
12. A leader who is not afraid to speak up when they see something that is wrong or needs changing.					
13. A leader who blames others for their mistakes					
14. A leader who attempts to create distrust among team members.					
15. A leader who holds people accountable for their performance.					
16. A leader who is a good steward of the responsibilities assigned to him.					
17. A leader who does not care about growing his team but focuses only on what has to be done to get production out.					
18. A leader that values diversity.					
19. A leader that listens to me when I have a concern.					
20. A leader who is active in the community.					