

Congruence of Leader-follower Evaluations and the Effect of Leadership Styles on Work Engagement

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Abstract

The shift into relationship-oriented, positive leadership theories in recent decades brought with it a deeper investigation of leader-follower interactions. Transformational and engaging leadership styles are widely assumed to be proven determinants of work engagement, although these conclusions are based mostly on followers' evaluations. Therefore, we analysed followers' and leaders' evaluations simultaneously and used congruent results to test which leadership dimensions positively impact followers' work engagement. Our results show that follower-rated passive and charismatic leadership negatively affect work engagement. In contrast, follower-rated inspirational communication and passive leadership rated by leaders positively affect above-average work engagement. From them, inspirational communication seemed to be the most influential factor. These results draw attention to the importance of leaders' communication and emphasise its role in leader-follower interactions.

Keywords

leadership style, work engagement, leader-follower congruence, inspirational communication

1 Introduction

Awareness of the importance of interpersonal relations has coincided with the evolution of leadership theories. In the early decades of leadership research, leaders were assumed to be task managers, and theories concentrated on task orientation and transactional exchange between leaders and followers. Later, the focus of researchers shifted to leader-follower relations, which we can assess as a turning point in the history of leadership studies (Bass, 1985). Since followers became more important in the act of leading, their personal characteristics like needs, motivations, and future aspirations, and even the way they picture leadership got more attention.

Many writers have described how followers' evaluation of leadership behaviour affects work engagement, but few researchers have hitherto considered evaluating leaders and followers simultaneously. Therefore, our article aims to analyse the similarities and differences between leader-follower evaluations to reveal which leadership behaviours have the highest impact on followers' engagement. First, we introduce the main leadership theories

associated with work engagement and the factors contributing to this motivational state. After that, we highlight congruent evaluations and their influential role in engaging others. Then we discuss the results and make suggestions for future research.

1.1 Positive leadership theories

The new wave of leadership theories emphasises personal values. Parts of them are called positively oriented leadership theories, which focus on positive attitudes and behaviours, like authentic (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008), servant (Patterson, 2003; Russell and Stone, 2002), adaptive (Heifetz and Laurie, 1997), transformational (Bass, 1985; Bass and Riggio, 2005) or ethical leadership (Brown et al., 2005). Furthermore, positive leadership theories like engaging leadership (Schaufeli, 2015) help to strengthen relationships, and strengths-based leadership (Linley and Joseph, 2004) even boosts self-confidence. These theories usually describe leaders' desired behaviours and their

impact on followers. From this perspective, we can highlight transformational and engaging leadership theories.

By the turn of the millennium, transformational leadership theory dominated leadership research. Burns (1978) defined this concept first as transforming leadership. According to his definition, this style of leadership is based on transforming followers' values and satisfying their needs. Bass (1985) extended this definition and emphasised the motivational aspect of the theory. Hence, it is argued, leaders can transform values if they make followers aware of organisational goals and help them align these goals with their personal ones. This way, they motivate followers and become transformational leaders (Yukl, 1999).

Transformational leadership is usually described with the help of four dimensions: individualised consideration, intellectual stimulation, idealised influence (charisma), and inspirational motivation (Yukl, 1999). But these are rarely measured separately from the transactional leadership dimensions. These dimensions can be described as part of a leadership continuum that incorporates transformational, transactional, and passive leadership (García-Sierra and Fernández-Castro, 2018), covering the full range of leadership behaviours (Wong and Giessner, 2018). Transformational and transactional leadership behaviours are usually measured with Multifactorial Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), which has many variations. In our research, we use the version published by Avolio et al. (1999). They proposed a six-factor structure of leadership behaviour. They define charisma as an energising behaviour, allowing followers to identify with a charismatic role model and his vision. According to their definition, intellectual stimulation inspires followers to question standard practices and find new ways to overcome challenges. Individualised consideration is based on the satisfaction of needs to help followers reach self-actualisation. Contingent reward belongs to the category of transactional leadership behaviours since it captures both expectations and achievable rewards. Active management-by-exception is also a transactional leadership behaviour. Leaders using this style tend to look for mistakes and possible problems to avoid declining performance and maintain successful execution. Finally, passive leadership is also measured by MLQ. This style is characterised by preventing actions and decisions (Avolio et al., 1999).

Despite receiving strong criticism, the transformational leadership theory is still a good reference point for new theorists. Dulewicz and Higgs (2005) also used transformational and change leadership theories to create a new

instrument and define a unique leadership style called engaging leadership. Alimo-Metcalfe et al. (2008) described engaging leadership later as a "nearby transformational" leadership style too. Lately, the engaging leadership theory of Schaufeli (2015) has come to dominate research and distinguishes his model of engaging leadership from previous attempts to define it, as well as transformational leadership.

Engaging leadership is defined by Schaufeli (2015) as a leadership behaviour that positively affects work engagement. One of the strengths of this theory is that it is built on motivational theories and highlights at the same time the effect of this leadership behaviour. This leadership behaviour satisfies the need for autonomy, competence, relatedness, and meaningfulness through inspiration, strengthening, connection, and empowerment (Rahmadani et al., 2019; Robijn et al., 2020). Inspiration means acknowledgment of contribution. Strengthening means challenging employees by delegating tasks and responsibilities (Rahmadani et al., 2019). Connecting means facilitating teamwork and maintaining a good atmosphere (Schaufeli, 2015), and empowering means giving freedom to employees in decision-making and expressing their opinions (Rahmadani et al., 2019; Schaufeli, 2021). The main difference between transformational and engaging leadership is that the former includes intellectual stimulation and idealised influence. At the same time, the latter consists of connecting leadership behaviour, emphasizing the importance of bonding (Schaufeli, 2015). Interpreting the explanation of Schaufeli (2015), we can assume that transformational leadership theory tends to concentrate on cognitive characteristics while engaging leadership emphasises affective and emotional aspects.

1.2 Determinants of work engagement

Since transformational and engaging leadership share similarities, both forms of leadership behaviour can result in work engagement (Rahmadani and Schaufeli, 2022). Several research studies support the hypothesis that transformational leadership enhances work engagement (Rahmadani and Schaufeli, 2022; Salanova et al., 2011; Schmitt et al., 2016; Yasin Ghadi et al., 2013), even daily (Breevaart et al., 2014; Tims et al., 2011) and actively or passively (Breevaart et al., 2014), and engaging leadership has the same effect (Basinska et al., 2018; Rahmadani and Schaufeli, 2019; 2022; Rahmadani et al., 2019; Robijn et al., 2020; Schaufeli, 2015; van Tuin et al., 2020; 2021). Moreover, this is felt not only on an individual but also at a team level (Rahmadani et al., 2020).

Besides leadership, several factors influence work engagement, which was defined as a positive, affective-cognitive state in contrast to burnout. Engaged people are characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption. Vigour is associated with high activation and motivation to invest in work. Dedication is associated with a high level of identification, meaning strong cognitive and affective involvement. Absorption is associated with flow, defined by Csíkszentmihályi. The former is a simpler concept, based on depth of concentration and attachment (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Wollard and Shuck (2011) did a wide-ranging review of the literature on work engagement. As a main result of their investigation, two factors emerged as antecedents of work engagement, individual and organisational factors. They listed several individual antecedents, which we believe can be classified further. Personal characteristics and individual perceptions, including affective and cognitive aspects, arise as individual factors. The main personal characteristics are absorption, coping style, curiosity, dedication, emotional fit, motivation, status, optimism, self-esteem, vigour, and value congruence (Wollard and Schuck, 2011), proactive personality (Monica, 2019), occupational self-efficacy (Chaudhary, 2014). Meanwhile, feelings of control, involvement in meaningful work, alignment with organisational goals, perceived organisational support, and core self-evaluation (Wollard and Shuck, 2011) are subjective evaluations based on individual perception, representing different cognitive components. Similarly, Monica (2019) found that core self-evaluation and Chaudhary (2014) found that climate perception and individual and similar group perceptions influence the level of work engagement.

The second factor Wollard and Shuck (2011) identified as organisational. In our opinion, it is also a complex factor of antecedents and can be broken down into subgroups of organisational, human resource, job, leadership, and interpersonal characteristics. Organisational factors like corporate culture, corporate social responsibility, mission and vision, positive workplace climate, and supportive organisational culture influence engagement (Wollard and Shuck, 2011). Anitha (2014) supported this with evidence that the working environment is influential. Wollard and Shuck (2011) listed antecedents related to human resource (HR) practices as organisational factors like feedback, opportunities for learning, rewards, and talent management. Anitha (2014) extended the list of HR practices influencing work engagement by emphasising compensation, workplace well-being, organisational policies, training,

and career development opportunities. Chaudhary (2014) also underlined the importance of a good human resource development climate. Wollard and Shuck (2011) highlighted the role of a leader, interpersonal relations, and the importance of job characteristics. Jobs should be fitted to employees (Firouznia et al., 2021; Wollard and Shuck, 2011), and they should feel that they are safe and do a meaningful job (Firouznia et al., 2021). Leaders should formulate clear expectations, encourage followers, be effective by themselves, and motivate employees to use their strengths (Wollard and Shuck, 2011). As regards leadership, Anitha (2014); Firouznia et al. (2021) and Monica (2019) all contended that leader-follower interactions and relations should be considered when the work engagement of followers is evaluated.

Since leader-follower interactions and leadership seem critical for follower engagement, we would like to analyse which leadership dimensions affect followers' work engagement the most. Follower perceptions are also proven factors influencing work engagement, but these are usually studied separately from leaders' self-evaluations. In our research, we want to focus on leader-follower relations and understand how followers' evaluation of leaders and leaders' self-evaluation influence work engagement. Since not only individual but also similar perceptions to others can influence engagement (Chaudhary, 2014), we use the congruent evaluations between leaders and followers to determine the most influential leadership dimensions.

2 Method

2.1 Participants and procedure

Data gathering started in the spring of 2022 within the framework of an academic subject. Students from the Master of Business Administration (MBA) master's degree programme filled out questionnaires measuring their personal characteristics and leadership styles. They were asked to involve at least three followers they closely work with and who can give adequate feedback about their leadership behaviour. Their colleagues also completed a list of queries about their personal characteristics and evaluated the leadership of the requesting person. The United Psychological Research Ethics Committee approved our research (permission number: 2021-111).

The MBA students were informed personally. Furthermore, written information about the research was also delivered to them. Their colleagues were informed at the beginning of the questionnaire about the aim of our research, and we made it clear that their answers were to

be handled anonymously, so no one would be able to identify them. Participation in the research was rewarded for MBA students. The midterm performance of students who answered the questionnaires was accepted.

Altogether 60 MBA students answered our questionnaires, 38 men and 22 women. The average age was 35.86 (SD = 6.79). 48.3% of our respondents (29 people) have more than ten years of work experience, and only one has less than three years of work experience. 18 participants (30%) have less than one year of leadership experience, 14 participants (23.3%) have one to three years of leadership experience, 8 participants (13.3%) have three to five years of leadership experience, 11 participants (18.3%) have five to seven years of leadership experience, 4 participants (6.7%) have eight to ten years of leadership experience and 3 participants (5%) have been working in leadership positions for more than ten years. Currently, 10 participants (16.7%) work as executive leaders, 27 participants (45%) work as team leaders, 20 people (33.3%) work as an employee and are not leaders, and one person (1.7%) is an intern. The number of subordinates, whom we assume as followers, varies in a wide range from zero to 33. The average number of followers is 4.81 (SD = 6.93), the mode is 0, and the median is 3. On average, three followers evaluated MBA students (SD = 0.84). The minimum number of raters was one, and the maximum was five. We summarised the evaluations and used the average ratings of followers to describe leadership behaviour from their perspectives.

2.2 Measurements

MBA students and followers filled out the same questionnaires but from different perspectives. MBA students gave self-assessments on work engagement and leadership styles. At the same time, followers filled out a questionnaire about their own work engagement and provided feedback about their colleagues, our MBA students.

We used the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al., 2006) to measure work engagement. This 7-point Likert scale can be rated from 1 (never) to 7 (always). It measures the three dimensions of work engagement: Vigour, Dedication, and Absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

To measure leadership styles, we used Engaging Leadership Scale (ELS) (Schaufeli, 2016 cited in Robijn et al., 2020:p.388); Multifactorial Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Avolio et al., 1999); and Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (RTLQ)

(Rafferty and Griffin, 2004). All the measurements mentioned above were translated into Hungarian by the authors.

Engaging Leadership Scale (Schaufeli, 2016 cited in Robijn et al., 2020:p.388) uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). It measures four dimensions of engaging leadership: Inspiring, Strengthening, Connecting, and Empowering (Robijn et al., 2020).

Multifactorial Leadership Questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (frequently, if not always) and measures six dimensions of transactional and transformational leadership styles: Charismatic/inspirational leadership, Intellectual stimulation, Individualised consideration, Contingent reward, Management-by-Exceptions-Active, Passive leadership. The version we used was the MLQ-5X published by Avolio et al. (1999).

Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (RTLQ) (Rafferty and Griffin, 2004) measures leadership with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It describes five dimensions of transformational leadership: Vision, Inspirational communication, Intellectual stimulation, Supportive leadership, and Personal recognition (Rafferty and Griffin, 2004).

3 Results

We used IBM SPSS 29 for data analysis. Since we wanted to analyse the congruence of leader-follower evaluations, we filtered out those respondents currently in leadership positions.

38 leaders participated in our research, 28 men and 10 women. The average age was 37.94 (SD = 6.47). 60.5% of our respondents (23 people) have more than ten years of work experience, 7 respondents (18.4%) have eight to ten years of work experience, 5 respondents (13.2 %) have five to seven years of work experience, and 3 respondents (7.9%) have three to five years of work experience. Three participants (7.9%) have less than one year of leadership experience, 12 participants (31.6%) have one to three years of leadership experience, 7 participants (18.4%) have three to five years of leadership experience, 10 participants (26.3%) have five to seven years of leadership experience, 3 participants (7.9%) have eight to ten years of leadership experience and 3 participants (7.9%) work in leadership positions for more than ten years. Currently, 10 participants (26.3%) work as executive leaders, and 28 (73.6%) work as team leaders. 123 followers evaluated our leaders in total.

The average number of followers is 6.79 (SD = 7.39), the mode is 2, and the median is 4. On average, 3.35 followers evaluated leaders (SD = 0.85). The minimum number of raters was 2, and the maximum was 5. The minimum level of their engagement was 3.88, and the maximum was 6.23. The average engagement was 5.32 (SD = 0.51).

First, we analysed the differences between leader-follower evaluations. We used the aggregated data and ran paired-sample *T*-tests to see if there were significantly different results on the scales. We found significant differences between Inspiring (ELS) rated by leaders (*Mdn* = 4) and rated by followers (*Mdn* = 4.16) ($Z(37) = -2.016; p = 0.044$); Vision (RTLQ) rated by leaders (*Mdn* = 3.66) and followers (*Mdn* = 4.33) ($Z(37) = -2.428; p = 0.015$); Individualised consideration (MLQ) rated by leaders (*Mdn* = 4) and followers (*Mdn* = 3.75) ($Z(37) = -1.973; p = 0.049$); Personal recognition (RTLQ) rated by leaders (*Mdn* = 5) and rated by followers (*Mdn* = 4.5) ($Z(37) = -2.572; p = 0.01$).

In those cases where we found no significant difference, we tested the correlation of leader-follower evaluations. If the correlations were significant and positive, we assumed leaders and followers see the leader's style similarly. We considered the cases with similar tendencies as congruent. The significant correlations are listed in Table 1.

Second, we analysed further the congruent pairs testing which evaluation (leader or follower) affects more likely the work engagement of followers. We grouped our followers into two groups according to their level of work engagement. The two groups were:

1. subaverage or average engagement and
2. above-average engagement.

We used logistic regression to test whether leaders' or followers' evaluation has a higher impact on the above-average work engagement of followers. The omnibus test showed a significant model ($\chi^2(4, N = 38) = 16.348; p = 0.003$) with 47.6 % variance explained ($R_N^2 = 0.476$). The model has 78.4% accuracy and 84.4% sensitivity based on the Classification table in Table 2.

Table 1 Significant correlations between leader and follower evaluations

Variable pair (leader-follower)	Correlations	Significance
Intellectual stimulation (MLQ)	$r = 0.408$	$p = 0.012$
Passive (MLQ)	$r = 0.348$	$p = 0.035$
Charismatic/inspirational leadership (MLQ)	$\tau = 0.360$	$p = 0.002$
Inspirational communication (RTLQ)	$\tau = 0.287$	$p = 0.023$

Table 2 Classification table of logistic regression

Observed	Predicted		Percentage
	Sub-/average	Above-average	
Subaverage	13	5	72.2
Above-average	3	16	84.2
Overall			78.4

Passive (MLQ) leadership rated by a leader has a significant and positive effect on above-average work engagement ($p = 0.017; \text{Exp}(B) = 20.138$). Passive (MLQ) leadership rated by followers has a significant and negative impact on above-average work engagement ($p = 0.019; \text{Exp}(B) = 0.049$). Charismatic/inspirational leadership (MLQ), rated by followers, and Inspirational communication (RTLQ), rated by followers, also significantly affected above-average work engagement. Follower-rated Charismatic/inspirational leadership (MLQ) had a negative influence ($p = 0.032; \text{Exp}(B) = 0.005$), while follower-rated Inspirational communication (RTLQ) had a positive effect on above-average work engagement ($p = 0.016; \text{Exp}(B) = 314.548$). These results are visualised in Fig. 1.

4 Discussion

Although several scientific pieces of evidence support the relationship between leadership and work engagement, congruent and simultaneous leader-follower evaluations and their effect on followers' work engagement have not been investigated yet. As far as we know, only Ye et al. (2021) examined the leader-follower congruence in work engagement in association with fit theories, but they did not investigate the effect of leadership behaviour on engagement, while Thompson and Glasø (2018) also used joint assessment from leaders and followers in association with situational leadership and follower commitment, but with different theoretical backgrounds.

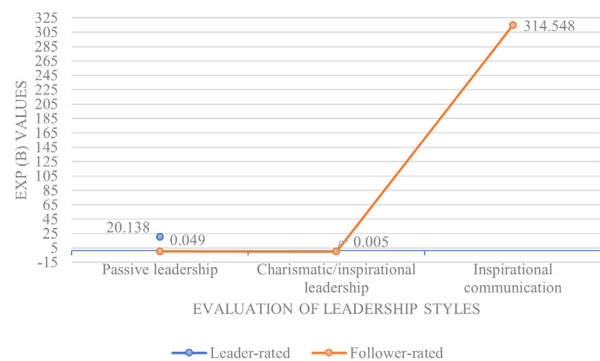


Fig. 1 Odds ratios of significant leadership dimensions

Based on the preliminary findings of Chaudhary (2014); Monica (2019), and Wollard and Shuck (2011), we hypothesised that evaluations based on perceptions affect work engagement, and they could have different impacts in the case of followers' and leaders' evaluations. Furthermore, we considered their evaluations simultaneously, as suggested by Anitha (2014); Firouznia et al. (2021) and Monica (2019), to see the impact of congruent evaluations. Our research question integrated these two aspects to determine which leadership dimensions influence followers' work engagement the most.

Engaging leadership is strongly associated with work engagement since this motivational state can be reached if basic psychological needs are satisfied. According to this assumption, engaging leadership behaviours affect work engagement through need satisfaction (Schaufeli, 2021). Based on this, we hypothesised that engaging leadership dimensions affect followers' work engagement even if leaders' and followers' evaluations are congruent. Our results showed that the evaluations of engaging leadership behaviour differ between leaders and followers. Since these were incongruent, we did not use these dimensions for further analysis and could not test the hypothesis.

Transformational leadership also seemed to determine work engagement (Breevaart et al., 2014; Rahmadani and Schaufeli, 2022; Salanova et al., 2011; Schmitt et al., 2016; Tims et al., 2011; Yasin Ghadi et al., 2013) significantly. Therefore, we hypothesised that this leadership style would also affect work engagement. We used the congruent dimensions of the Multifactorial Leadership Questionnaire and the Transformational Leadership Questionnaire involving transactional and passive leadership styles based on the suggestion of Breevaart et al. (2014). Charismatic/inspirational leadership and Inspirational communication were found to have significant effect on followers' work engagement. Additionally, passive leadership also showed a significant effect.

The odds ratio of Inspirational communication indicates that the leader's communication primarily determines followers' engagement if followers perceive the communication as inspiring. Moreover, leaders' passive leadership style also has a positive effect if leaders describe themselves as passive, while charismatic behaviour and passive leadership perceived by followers have a negative impact on above-average work engagement.

Avolio et al. (1999) also referred to inspiration in defining charismatic leadership. There has been a long-running debate about charisma and inspirational leadership and their differences which our results can expand. We have found

that inspirational or charismatic behaviour is insufficient per se to enhance engagement; it can even reduce followers' engagement. From these behaviours, only inspirational communication impacts engagement positively, highlighting the importance of good communication. According to our results, followers need to perceive communication as inspirational to become engaged. This perception might vary from follower to follower. Therefore, leaders should be aware of personal differences and needs since work engagement is based on individual needs (Schaufeli, 2015; 2021).

In addition, passive leadership positively affects work engagement if a leader describes his or her behaviour as passive. Conversely, if followers perceive leaders as passive, it may decrease engagement. Even in the literature, there are conflicting results about how passive leadership relates to engagement. On the one hand, our findings are consonant with the conclusion of Feliciano et al. (2022) that the lack of communication in passive leadership can reduce work engagement, and these two constructs correlate negatively. Popli and Rizvi (2016) also found that passive-avoidant leadership and engagement correlate negatively, and passive leadership have a negative effect on engagement. On the other hand, passive leadership can positively impact engagement (Ancarani et al., 2021; Blomme et al., 2015). Leaders' style does not necessarily reduce work engagement because, in some cases, organisational or personal characteristics, like the need for autonomy in followers, serve to eliminate the effect of leaders' behaviour (Blomme et al., 2015). Therefore, passive leadership can also positively affect followers' work engagement.

One further interpretation of the different effects of passive leadership could be that leaders might mistake passive leadership for empowering leadership since there is a thin dividing line between these two leadership styles (Wong and Giessner, 2018). They may think that if they let followers work alone and do the work on their own, they empower and motivate them. Some items of MLQ imply the self-reliance of followers, which can be related to empowerment. In contrast, other items refer to the absence of a leader. This difference should be analysed later by psychometrically testing the reliability and factor structure of the translated version of MLQ and discovering the different assumptions about passive leadership with qualitative research.

5 Conclusion

Research has already proven that leadership affects work engagement, in the cases of both transformational and engaging leadership. But as far as we know, simultaneous analysis of leader and follower evaluation has rarely

been used to analyse the determinants of work engagement. We wanted to test whether the evaluations of leadership behaviour from leaders' and followers' perspectives are similar and from these congruent styles, which have a higher impact on followers' work engagement.

Our findings support that leadership styles affect work engagement, especially above-average work engagement of followers. The regression model showed that Passive leadership, both self-rated and follower-rated, and follower-rated Charismatic/inspirational leadership and Inspirational communication had a significant effect on above-average work engagement. Inspirational communication had the highest positive impact. Besides communication, Passive leadership, rated by leaders, also positively affected followers' work engagement. All these indicate that perceived Inspirational communication and self-rated Passive leadership can increase the probability of higher engagement. While perceived Charismatic/inspirational leadership and perceived Passive leadership have a negative effect, meaning a lower chance of having highly engaged followers.

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