Doctoral thesis summary

Managing current challenges of employees in hybrid work environments.
From the leadership styles towards work engagement, organizational commitment,
wellbeing and burnout

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Revolving around the dramatic shifts produced by COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a growing and imperative need for the leaders to be more empathic in connection to the challenges that might emerge in the workplace context. Including data from recent surveys by leading consulting firms indicates that in a reimagined workforce, leadership styles that are authentic and relevant are more likely to foster engagement and wellbeing. Conversely, a leadership style that prioritizes productivity alone is likely to lead to burnout and disengagement. Recent research indicates that to meet the demands of today and the future, management must creatively rethink human resource management and improve the entire employee experience by prioritizing individuals, encouraging collaboration, maintaining effective communication and rebuilding connections and trust. According to the McKinsey Global Institute's 2021 report on how the future of work will look like after COVID- 19, it was highlighted that we might be able to find a solution by combing remote and in-person work to the to the context where 20-25% of workers in developed economies and an estimate of 10% of workers in emerging economies can work from home for three to five days a week. This applies primarily to computerized office work, including offices of various sizes and corporate headquarters.

Brătianu and Bejinaru (2021, p. 11) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic arrived unexpectedly, similar to a natural disaster, and took people and organizations by surprise due to its disruptive impact and social interconnectedness. When the unimaginable became reality, it became apparent that organizations and governments had no strategy to deal effectively with such a pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated that we live in an unpredictable and volatile environment. The emergence of uncertainty led to the development of new knowledge acquisition techniques and required a combination of planned and emergent approaches to knowledge acquisition. Managers can use the valuable knowledge embedded in intentional activities and

explore new opportunities for knowledge generation and reducing chronic uncertainty in business (Brătianu & Bejinaru, 2021, p. 15).

Today, the pervasive lack of certainty in organizations is leading to the emergence of new ways of thinking and probabilistic models for finding answers. This forces even genuine leaders to adapt to different leadership styles. The main reason for this is the need to develop the essential dynamic capabilities of the organization by leveraging new knowledge and competence structures (Brătianu, Hadad, & Bejinaru, 2020). Future leadership styles. Deloitte's July 2020 research, "How COVID-19 is reshaping leadership beyond the crisis", presents evidence to support this idea. The study posits that the social and economic crises triggered by the ongoing epidemic serve as an exceptional but emblematic portrait of the challenges facing leaders in the contemporary era. Competent management of crisis situations requires a leadership approach that can be perceived as too authoritarian and focused on taking decisive action in ordinary circumstances. In times of ambiguity, quick decisions need to be made; these exceptional situations require a leadership approach that prioritizes human needs and is highly motivated.

In theory, most researchers agree that leadership style significantly influences the level of Work/employee engagement or disengagement. It was proven that employees show a higher performance rate and are more engaged in the work they do if their leaders show the attributes highlighted below: Commitment, as defined by Welbourne (2007), refers to an individual's level of involvement and dedication to their work within an organization. The involvement in the organization, described by CIPD (2006), refers to an individual's loyalty and dedication to the organization's goals and values.

Authentic leadership in the context of work can have implications that lead to trade-offs between different dimensions of employee wellbeing, leading to both increased and decreased Work/employee engagement. Currently, Work/employee engagement is widely recognized as a vital element for an organization's success. Many companies improve employee motivation by implementing various ways to encourage Work/employee engagement, with leader behavior being identified as one of the most impactful strategies.

Without a doubt, employee wellbeing is a significant factor that strongly influences the achievement of exceptional return on investment, benefiting both individual employees and the overall growth and productivity of the organization. In their research, Mohd et al. (2020) demonstrate that a confident outlook of authentic leaders would improve the wellbeing of the

employees indirectly through non-monetary benefits and relevant tasks. In addition, it suggests that both monetary and non-monetary incentives should be evaluated separately, taking into account current socio-economic conditions and employees' motivational needs.

From an organizational perspective, leaders have the ability to foster the development of authenticity among their employees, which in turn enhances their wellbeing and overall performance (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). This is because true leaders possess the qualities of being attentive listeners and being proactive in meeting the needs of their subordinates, which in turn makes them feel important and valued. In addition, they possess a high level of skill in stimulating employees and cultivating a strong sense of satisfaction and loyalty among colleagues. In addition, it is often believed that establishing a connection between an authentic leader and employees will lead to a positive employee experience characterized by engaging and meaningful work.

In order to capture all the relevant relationships associated with the research theme, the main objective of the research is to investigate whether the hybrid environment generated by the COVID-19 pandemic stimulated a certain type of leadership, namely transformational, transactional or passive-avoidant. Further, it will be explored whether and to what extent, each of the three leadership styles influences the work engagement, organizational commitment, the wellbeing, and burnout of the employees. This objective will be achieved by reaching the following specific objectives: to explore whether and to what extent leadership styles (i.e., transformational, transactional, and passive avoidant) support organizational commitment; to investigate whether and to what extent leadership styles (i.e., transformational, transactional, and passive avoidant) correlated with work/employee engagement; to investigate whether and to what extent leadership styles (i.e., transformational, transactional, and passive avoidant) support job-related affective wellbeing; to explore whether and to what extent leadership styles (i.e., transformational, transactional, and passive avoidant) correlate with burnout; to explore whether and to what extent different types of leadership (i.e., transformational, transactional, and passive avoidant) lead to job performance.

In order to obtain a comprehensive view of the subject and to carry out a thorough analysis, it was necessary to collect primary data. Therefore, the primary data came from the application of a questionnaire developed strictly for the collection of data needed to test the proposed research model. It was determined that a quantitative approach would be most effective in investigating whether the hybrid environment generated by the COVID-19 pandemic stimulated

a certain type of leadership, namely transformational, transactional or passive-avoidant and whether and to what extent each of the three leadership styles influences the work engagement, organizational commitment, the wellbeing and burnout of the employees. Thus, a dedicated questionnaire was developed to collect this data.

The research was conducted in Romania, only employees from big corporations being selected for data collection in order to ensure sample consistency. A convenience sample of 203 respondents was retrieved, the selection of individuals being catalyzed by three managers from different companies who have decided to distribute the invitation to fill in the online questionnaire throughout their personal and professional networks. The questionnaire-based survey unfolded during three months, from the beginning of May to the end of July 2023.

The data in this study will be examined via two different research techniques and statistical tests, namely the Pearson correlation coefficient for bivariate correlations (by means of IBM SPSS 24) and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) technique (by means of SmartPLS 4). The analysis of the correlations will follow the established hypotheses and is intended to make a preliminary analysis of the inferred relationships between constructs as a prerequisite of further testing an integrative structural model.

With the view to ensure a solid argumentative structure, the thesis was organized into five main chapters. The first chapter consists of a bibliometric analysis looking into the key constructs of interest. The second and third chapters cover an extensive literature review related to each construct, followed by the scrutiny of the relationships among the key constructs. The fourth chapter comprises the research methodology providing detailed information regarding the objectives, hypotheses, materials and methods, measures, and sample. The fifth chapter presents the findings and their discussion from different points of view. The thesis ends with the conclusions section which encompasses the theoretical and practical implications, the research limitations and future directions.

In terms of the relevant findings, the computation of Pearson coefficients showed multiple significant correlations between the sub-scales of transformational, transactional and passive-avoidant leadership and the sub-scales of the dependent variables as previously discussed. In what concerns the structural model, only a few of the inferred relationships proved to exert significant effects. As for transformational leadership, only two hypotheses emerged as relevant, namely, transformational leadership positively correlates with work engagement and transformational

leadership positively influences work engagement. Furthermore, paying heed to the passive-avoidant leadership style, some relationships proved to be significant: passive-avoidant leadership has positive effects on various burnout sub-scales, in terms of both frequency and intensity, that is, on emotional exhaustion (frequency mode), depersonalization (frequency mode), emotional exhaustion (intensity mode), depersonalization (intensity mode), personal accomplishment (intensity mode). No significant relationships were retrieved between transactional leadership and the sub-scales of the dependent variables.

From a theoretical perspective, the research yields benefit at multiple levels. First, it integrates within a common framework many organizational processes and outcomes, using standardized instruments which have proved their relevance and suitability over time. Second, it captures the status-quo in a specific context – hybrid work environment – as determined by the COVID-19 pandemic context. Third, it illustrates the effects posed by various styles of leadership on employees' commitment, engagement, wellbeing, burnout and performance and signals the imperative to delve into the underlying connections between these variables.

On a managerial level, investigating leadership styles in the context of hybrid work environments is important due to several reasons. First, hybrid work environments, which combine remote and onsite work, have rapidly increased due to technological advances and particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. Leadership styles must evolve to manage effectively in this new context. Hybrid work is expected to alter the dynamics of communication, requiring leaders to adapt their approach to effectively reach and engage their teams who are distributed across different locations. Second, different leadership approaches can have varying impacts on remote employee engagement, motivation, and productivity. Understanding which leadership styles work best in this setting is crucial for performance. Moreover, hybrid environments can lead to disparities in experiences and visibility between remote and in-office employees. Leaders need to foster inclusivity to ensure fair treatment and opportunities for all. Third, hybrid work often relies on digital tools for collaboration and communication. Applying leadership styles in this context may lead to different results in terms of organizational commitment, work engagement, affective wellbeing, burnout and job performance. Hybrid work requires trust from leaders towards employees who are working remotely. This is why leadership styles may substantially influence the culture within hybrid work environments, impacting policies, practices, and the overall work atmosphere. Overall, understanding leadership styles suitable for hybrid environments can help

organizations develop more effective management policies and training programs, leading to improved organizational commitment, work engagement, affective wellbeing, and job performance.

For practitioners working in corporations, the significant results of the study show that transformational leadership impact both the engagement of the employees and their job performance in a positive way, indicating that business leaders should focus their actions on supporting organizational members' initiatives overall. In a very practical way, engagement activities should be the highlight of their business and people agenda to foster a workplace where individuals feel more comfortable to be themselves. Leaders should constantly support open communication with their employees and find ways to build team cohesion such as team events, regular one-to-one meetings, etc. Those interactions with both their leaders and coworkers where individuals would feel support, a shared sense of purpose and encouragement would build stronger work relationships but would also be able to improve productivity and the overall wellbeing in the organization.

On the other hand, as proven by this study, during turbulent times, leaders should reassess the type of the applied leadership. Leaders who avoid making decisions, who are focused on problems that need to be corrected and who usually wait to take any type of actions until the situations reach a peak, the passive-avoidant type of leaders, have a positive direct effect on the burnout of the employees, enhancing directly their state of exhaustion on all levels - mental, emotional and physical. With that in mind, business leaders supported by the HR organizations should pay focus on the wellbeing of their employees and build initiatives meant to improve the general wellbeing.

In order to foster authentic relationships in corporations, that would enhance engagement, job performance and transform work for the better, leaders should pay attention to how they impact the organizational climate, how they build leadership programs meant to develop their organizational strategy and eventually reach their goals. As recent studies posit, there are growing challenges to rethink human resources leadership, the whole employee experience through efficient collaboration and meaningful communication.

As with any other research undertaking, the present one has some limitations which should be compensated for by future studies. On the one hand, the research design is only based on a quantitative method – i.e., questionnaire-based survey. Even though standardized instruments

have been used to measure the constructs of interest, the items may imply some level of subjectivity given the employed self-reported measures. In this respect, future studies may encompass qualitative methods alongside the quantitative ones and may include more objective measures to test the organizational dynamics.

The study would benefit from the inclusion of mediating and moderating variables which may provide a more accurate landscape of the organizational processes and outcomes. For example, the consideration of control variables like age or gender would advance additional insights into how the leadership styles generate different outcomes for women versus men, respectively for Generation X versus Generation Y versus Generation Z employees.

On the other hand, the research sample was quite small (i.e., 203 respondents). In this regard, future research may benefit from extending the target population and from allowing industry-centric analyses or inter-industry comparisons or even international comparative studies which would round off the proposed perspectives on leaderships styles and their outcomes.