Leadership in an Organization from the Perspective of Leaders and Employees

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Abstract

Aim: The purpose of the research was to determine how leadership is perceived in the organization and what challenges leaders face.

Methodology: The research method adopted was a diagnostic survey using a questionnaire. This survey was supported by a guided semi-structured interview.

Results: The conducted research allowed to conclude that both leaders and employees recognised that the basis of leadership is a common interpretation of the situation and environment, as well as inspiring employees. In the opinion of leaders and employees, a leader builds authority mainly through respect for others and the ability to make decisions. The most important features of a leader should be orientation towards success, determination and decisiveness, self-confidence, openness, empathy

and emotional intelligence. The most important competencies included: team building, openness to change, supporting development and understanding business. In turn, diligence, justice and decisiveness are the main values that a leader should follow.

Implications and recommendations: Future research should explore how leadership expectations vary across different generational cohorts.

Originality/value: This research uniquely combines a broad-scale diagnostic survey with qualitative, semi-structured interviews, offering both quantitative robustness and rich contextual insights into leadership perception.

Keywords: leadership, competencies of a leader, engagement

1.   Introduction

The processes occurring in today's world indicate changes taking place on a global scale, consisting of the dynamic development of the information society. Thanks to this process, both the external environment of organizations and the organizations themselves are subject to constant dynamic changes. The success of an organization in this changed reality will depend primarily on the effective adaptation of people to the conditions of the changing environment and thus will pose a significant challenge for modern leaders (Avery, 2009, p. 95). Leadership is among the most crucial elements leading to the success of organizations. An effective leader can organize a company to be ready for the next environmental challenges. Lack of proper leadership, in some situations, can bring a well--functioning organization to a crisis in a short time (Mrówka, 2010, p. 7). New leadership, conditioned by the requirements and dominant progress of the 21st century, is not a sense of power but a conscious responsibility aimed at the welfare of human potential in the organization (Wachowiak, 2001, pp. 13-14).

Through literature studies and own research, the article shows how leadership is perceived in organizations and what challenges lie ahead for leaders. A characterisation of a leader was made, presenting the values, traits, and competences which, according to leaders and employees, are the most important, indicating an effective leader influencing employee engagement. The research was conducted among 46 leaders and 61 employees who expressed their willingness to participate in the study. The participants come from two companies located in Lower Silesia[1].

2.   The Essence and Significance of Leadership

Leadership, according to Armstrong, is about achieving results through people. Leaders can achieve this with their teams by inspiring or persuading them to make a joint effort. Leadership is about encouraging and inspiring individuals and teams to give their best to achieve the desired result. The general goal of leaders is to accomplish tasks with the help of their group. To achieve this, they must gain the commitment and cooperation of the team, persuade the group to accept and achieve common goals, and make the best use of the possibilities, energy, and talent of team members (Armstrong, 1997, p. 226).

Tracy believed that leadership is the art of awakening extraordinary possibilities in ordinary people. Leadership is also the incredible ability to achieve great successes, and finally, it is the skill of choosing in which areas you and your people are the best and most effective (Tracy & Scheelen, 2000, p. 198).

Stogdill considered that leadership is the process of directing and influencing the activity of group members related to its tasks. Leadership is associated with other people, subordinates or followers.

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[1]   Due to the absence of consent, the names of the companies have not been disclosed.

By complying with the leader's instructions, group members contribute to defining his/her position and enable the leadership process. Without subordinates, all leadership traits of a leader would be meaningless. Leadership is also associated with the unequal distribution of power between the leader and group members. Members of the group are not completely deprived of it, and they can shape the group's actions in many ways and do so. Usually, however, the leader has more power. Another aspect of leadership is the ability to use various forms of power to influence the behaviors of followers in different ways. The ability to exert influence leads to another aspect of leadership. It follows that leadership is related to values (Bass & Stodgill, 1990, p. 7). Burns stated that moral leadership is related to values and requires providing followers with enough information about various action options so that they can make a reasonable choice when it is time to respond to the leader's proposals (Burns MacGregor, 1978, p. 58).

Northouse pointed out four key components of leadership: (1) leadership is a process, (2) leadership involves influence, (3) leadership occurs in teams, (4) leadership involves common goals. Starting from such an assumption, he considered that "leadership is a process in which an individual influences a group of people to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2013, p. 5).

Sonmez and Adiguzel emphasised that leadership plays a significant role in ensuring proper communication, access to information, and knowledge management among employees. They also pointed out the influence of leadership on innovations and employee creativity, highlighting that effective leadership combined with a favourable organizational culture is key to knowledge management within an organization, which in turn is crucial for achieving goals and organizational success (Sonmez & Adiguzel, 2020). Meanwhile, a group of researchers led by Irfan confirmed a positive relationship between servant leadership and organizational excellence. They indicated that the stronger the culture of servant leadership, the greater the organizational excellence, and servant leadership itself is key to improving organizational performance and increasing employee job satisfaction. Although the researchers noted some limitations of the study (a small research sample limited to Pakistan, China, and Saudi Arabia, and the lack of sufficient literature on servant leadership in Pakistan), an interesting relationship was shown between servant leadership, employee competencies, and organizational excellence (Irfan et al.,2022).

3.   Characteristics of the Contemporary Leader

In the team-based, post-industrial management model, the leader primarily plays the role of the creator of the organization's development vision, strategist and guide, coordinator, and mentor. Meeting the challenges of the future requires leaders to exhibit professionalism in both skills and knowledge acquisition. Leadership involves adapting behaviour to specific situations and the employees involved in them. For a leader to be credible within an organization, and to effectively influence employees, their actions must be based on consistent values and defined principles of conduct.

Leadership is based on the strong position of the leader. Not everyone can embody the role of a leader, as such a person must possess special qualities. A leader is primarily someone who inspires, motivates, persuades, and impacts others, as well as paving the way for changes. In the literature, many authors have identified desirable character traits and behaviors that distinguish a leader from others. According to Kirkpatrick and Locke, these include determination, motivation, responsibility, confidence, cognitive abilities. Among these character traits and behaviour, determination is defined as decisiveness in pursuing a goal despite difficulties, namely the leader's ability to take initiative in situations where the group needs it, showing dominance and perseverance in solving current problems. Confidence is a strong sense of self-worth and belief in one's unique competencies, which relates to influencing others and gives a sense of the correctness of decisions made. Leaders with such character traits are emotionally stable, balanced, and resistant to stress (Northouse, 2013, p. 24).

Responsibility is related to the credibility of the leader, and honesty. Individuals who take responsibility for their actions are inspiring to others, building trust in them.

According to Goleman, motivation is the tendency to achieve goals with optimism and perseverance. Leaders with a high level of motivation are characterised by a striving for achievement, optimism, initiative, and engagement (Goleman, 2004), whereas Zaccaro et al. listed the following traits: extroversion, emotional and social intelligence, motivation, openness, self-control, emotional stability, awareness, problem-solving ability, agreeableness, cognitive abilities (Northouse, 2013, p. 23). Goleman also highlighted emotional intelligence and considered it the most defining feature of the most effective leaders. Without it, a person may have the best education, a keen and analytical mind, an unlimited number of excellent ideas, but still will not become a great leader. Intellectual intelligence and technical skills are important as they represent the so-called threshold capabilities of an individual to undertake a managerial function. However, Brown challenged the importance of this trait, as the studies conducted did not show a correlation between intelligence and the accuracy of managerial judgments. This means that intelligence can be identified, however understood in the sense of the ability to think logically, cope in a rapidly changing environment, interact, and act. An intelligent boss is one who can listen, but also skillfully deal with feedback. Here again, the importance of self-assessment and the ability to deal with criticism was highlighted (Tokarski, 2006, p. 85).

Adair presented a distinct approach to leadership traits, highlighting integrity, toughness, honesty, warmth, humility, and self-belief as key characteristics (Adair, 1999, p. 12). According to Obłój, the most popular traits include self-confidence, ambition, achievement and success orientation, assertiveness, the ability to dominate others, stress tolerance, perseverance, decisiveness, intelligence, and courage (Obłój, 1994, p. 118).

Kremer et al. specifically analysed leadership in the context of innovation, developing recommendations for best practices in promoting employee creativity, empowering their voice, and sharing knowledge. In their view, a good leader supports building trust among employees, appreciates the willingness to help others, and promotes information sharing among all team members. The organizational culture, which should facilitate knowledge sharing, is also of significant importance. Another recommendation was the strategic design of teams, where it is important for a leader to be able to create smaller groups within a team and encourage them to manage themselves. Leaders should also promote the participation of new members in discussions and strive to gather as many ideas from employees as possible. The authors also stressed the importance of interaction with individuals outside the team – leaders should continuously encourage team members to share knowledge and ideas with people outside the team, supporting inter-organizational cooperation. Providing support to the team is also an extremely important aspect – a good leader should signal their support for the team and focus on sharing knowledge rather than just criticising mistakes. The last recommendation is to demonstrate organizational support: leaders should promote support for managers and employees, actively encourage suggestions and ideas at all levels of the organization. They should also communicate regularly with employees at various organizational levels and strive to understand their perspectives and potential concerns (Kremer et al., 2019).

The impact of authentic leadership on employee engagement was analysed by Chen and Wang, among others, pointing out that leaders aiming for authenticity should understand the values and beliefs of their employees, constantly ensuring that the demands placed on them align with their values and beliefs. Leaders should motivate their employees and provide all necessary assistance to make them more productive and inventive. The role of the organization, where authentic leadership should be practiced, is also crucial as it helps in creating a positive organizational culture conducive to employee engagement. Interestingly, the authors also highlighted the importance of HR departments' involvement, suggesting that they should support leaders in developing leadership competencies, for example, through professional training programmes on authentic leadership for all management levels (Chen & Wang, 2023).

Fries et al. conducted a systematic literature review on leadership styles and indicated that, for employee satisfaction, the transformational leadership style is more beneficial than other styles because it encourages participation and strengthens the sense of commitment and belonging (Fries et al., 2021). A key feature of a transformational leader is their ability to shape a common goal and vision, thereby motivating employees to engage in achieving the organization's objectives. Transformational leaders inspire, build trust and loyalty, and communicate in an effective and convincing manner. Such a leader serves as a role model, setting an example by engaging employees in decision-making processes, supporting their development, and promoting positive changes within the organization (Smith, 2022).

The topic of leadership in the context of digitalisation and digital transformation was analysed by Matsunaga, among others, who highlighted the crucial role of transformational leaders in the successful digital transformation of organizations, as transformational leaders inspire their employees, create a positive atmosphere, and support their employees in dealing with the uncertainties associated with digital transformation. He also stressed that digital transformation requires a cultural change, as it involves not only the replacement of tools or systems but fundamental changes in organizational culture (Matsunaga, 2024).

Contemporary studies on the manager-leader paradigm suggest that "a manager can no longer adopt the attitude of one who knows all. Instead, they should adopt the attitude of one who wants to learn." The continuous development of the leader is crucial, and the effectiveness of their actions depends on the ability to utilise and choose the right trait for a given situation. Thus, the evolution of leader traits and the way they are expressed indicate their interdependence, and only evaluating both allows for an effective assessment of leadership effectiveness and the leader themselves (Xu et al., 2014). A future leader does not give orders but increasingly refers to concepts such as empathy, collaboration, or acquiring knowledge from superiors and employees. In today's economy almost nothing is certain, and the only constant element is continuous change – in technology, in marketing and promotion strategies (for instance, the growing significance of social media, especially Facebook), changes in organizational methods (such as companies operating exclusively online), and finally, in management models. Today's managers have to deal with many difficulties that were previously unheard of. Nowadays, employees are better educated, information spreads at lightning speed, and teams often comprise a mix of many nationalities.

4.   Leadership in the Author's Own Research

As derived from the literature review on the subject, the issue of leadership is widely discussed in both national and international reference sources. Approaches to leadership vary, and the list of traits describing a contemporary leader is substantial and diverse. The approach to leadership, as well as opinions on the traits and competencies of leaders, were determined through the author's own research. A diagnostic survey using a questionnaire was adopted as the research method, supplemented by structured interviews. The interview served to clarify certain issues as well as to add to the questionnaire elements indicated by the respondents, which were of significant importance from the perspective of the sought answers. The questionnaire was completed anonymously.

The first set of questions directed at the respondents concerned their opinions on leadership and the identification of challenges leaders face in the current operational conditions of companies. The distribution of responses to these questions is presented in Table 1.

Both the leaders and the employees indicated that the basis of leadership is the common interpretation of the situation and environment by the leader and employees, as well as inspiring employees. These responses were most frequently indicated by both the leaders and the employees.

According to the leaders as well as the employees, the most significant challenges leaders face in the current operational conditions of companies are primarily inspiring employees to work in conditions of constant change and balancing the needs of the company with those of employees. Subsequently, adapting to an increasingly rapid pace of change was pointed out.

Table 1. The basis of leadership and challenges faced by the leaders

Percentage distribution of responses to the questions:		
1. What do you consider to be the basis of leadership in a company?	**Leaders**	**Employees**
Common interpretation of the situation and environment by the leader and employees	41.27	54.55
Domination by the leader through respect/power	9.52	16.67
Inspiring employees	39.39	22.73
Influence exerted by the leader on employees in personal contacts, considering their opinions and feelings	7.94	6.06
2. The most important challenges that leaders face in the current operational conditions of companies:	**Leaders**	**Employees**
Inspiring employees to work in conditions of constant change	38.89	43.48
Adapting to an increasingly rapid pace of change	25.00	11.59
Balancing the needs of the company with the needs of employees	33.33	39.13
Justifying necessary, unpopular actions and controversial decisions	2.78	5.80

Source: own elaboration.

Table 2. Characteristics of a leader

Percentage distribution of responses to the questions:		
3. Leaders' motivational approach is expressed in:	**Leaders**	**Employees**
professional and competent support of employees in their work and assistance in problem-solving	27.42	25.88
regularly providing feedback on the work done	12.10	14.12
giving praise and recognition	15.32	28.24
having a positive attitude towards coworkers	8.06	5.88
setting specific and ambitious tasks	5.65	1.18
entrusting not only tasks but also responsibility and decision-making opportunities	12.90	3.53
creating a friendly work atmosphere that increases engagement and willingness to work	18.55	21.18
4. What, in your opinion, builds a leader's authority?	**Leaders**	**Employees**
respect for others	21.43	34.44
communicativeness	10.39	8.89
composure	12.99	13.33
consistency in action	11.04	8.89
ability to handle a wrong decision	8.44	4.44
proper approach to mistakes	6.49	4.44
ability to make decisions	20.13	18.89
keeping one's word	9.09	6.67
5. What strengthens a leader's authority?	**Leaders**	**Employees**
setting clear goals and tasks	35.29	56.67
consistency in action	25.49	23.33
constructive criticism	17.65	6.67
objectivity	11.76	8.33
creativity	9.80	5.00
6. A good leader, who leads the company to success, is considered to be one who:	**Leaders**	**Employees**
is focused on people and relationships	17.95	9.41
understands that inspiring employees to work in conditions of constant change, adapting to an increasingly rapid pace of change, and balancing the needs of the company with the needs of employees are significant challenges in the current operational conditions of companies	41.03	50.59
establishes external contacts	5.13	1.18
acts as a coach developing and training their employees	14.10	20.00
is a planning and analysing strategist	14.10	14.12
is focused on results	7.69	4.71

Source: own elaboration.

Inspiring employees to work is very important, as indicated by both groups. Therefore, the next question addressed the ways in which a leader's motivational approach is expressed. It also sought to find out what is most important in building a leader's authority, how a leader can strengthen this authority, and what makes a good leader. The responses to these questions are shown in Table 2.

Inspiring (motivating) employees, according to the leaders, is primarily expressed in the professional and competent support of employees in their work and assistance in solving problems. The leaders considered creating a friendly work atmosphere, giving praise and recognition, as well as equally entrusting not only tasks but also responsibility and the ability to make decisions, and regularly providing feedback as very important in inspiring employees. However, the employees placed giving praise and recognition first, followed by support in work, creating a friendly atmosphere, and regular feedback on work performed.

The most important aspect of building a leader's authority, according to both groups, is respect for others, the ability to make decisions, and composure. Consistency in action and communicativeness are also considered important.

According to the leaders, a leader strengthens their authority mainly through clear goal and task setting, consistency in action, constructive criticism, and objectivity. Meanwhile, the employees believed that the most important in strengthening authority is clear goal and task setting and consistency in action.

A good leader who directs the company to success as perceived by both the leaders and the employees, is someone who understands that inspiring employees to work in conditions of constant change, adapting to an increasingly rapid pace of change, and balancing the needs of the company with the needs of employees are significant challenges in the current operational conditions of companies. According to the leaders, a good leader is focused on people and relationships and act equally as a coach developing and training their employees as well as a planning and analysing strategist. The employees pointed to someone who is a coach developing and training their employees, and a planning and analysing strategist.

The research also aimed to determine the values, traits, and competencies a good leader should embody, and those most important for effective leadership. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Values, traits, and competencies of a leader

Percentage distribution of responses to the questions:		
7. What values, in your opinion, should a good leader embody?	**Leaders**	**Employees**
decisiveness	10.24	17.54
understanding	8.43	6.14
fairness	18.07	27.19
diligence	23.49	28.07
openness	7.23	4.39
honesty	11.45	7.89
credibility	10.24	4.39
consistency	10.84	4.39
8. The most important traits a leader should have to lead effectively:	**Leaders**	**Employees**
success-oriented	16.98	13.82
self-confidence	7.92	15.45
optimism	3.77	0.81
determination and decisiveness	17.74	17.07
openness, empathy, emotional intelligence	9.81	15.45
focus on priority tasks	4.53	6.50
creativity	4.53	4.07

flexibility	4.53	1.63
risk-taking	9.06	8.13
strong desire and will for success	0.38	0.81
making the right choices	5.66	4.07
ethical behaviour	5.28	0.81
intuition	2.26	0.81
stress resistance	7.55	10.57
9. What competencies, in your opinion, should a leader have:	**Leaders**	**Employees**
supporting development	10.99	13.11
building a team	18.85	28.69
building relationships	9.95	9.84
supporting vision	2.62	2.46
supporting innovation	7.33	8.20
openness to change	13.09	11.48
results orientation	8.38	8.20
customer focus	6.28	1.64
business understanding	14.66	9.84
delegating tasks	7.85	6.56

Source: own elaboration.

Regarding the values that leaders should be guided by, the leaders pointed out, in order: diligence, fairness, honesty, consistency, credibility, and decisiveness. According to the employees, the most important values were diligence, fairness, and decisiveness.

In the opinion of the employees, the most important traits a leader should have are determination and decisiveness, self-confidence, and openness, empathy, and emotional intelligence, followed by a success-oriented attitude and stress resistance. The leaders identified determination and decisiveness, a success-oriented attitude, openness, empathy, emotional intelligence, and the ability to take risks in order.

Among the most important leadership competencies, the leaders highlighted team building, business understanding, openness to change, supporting development, and relationship building. According to the employees, the most crucial for a leader are the ability to build a team, support development, openness to change, relationship building, and business understanding.

The last question addressed the influence of the leader on building employee engagement. The responses to this question are contained in Table 4.

Table 4. The role of the leader in building engagement

Percentage distribution of responses to the questions:		
10. Do you think a leader influences building an employee's engagement?	**Leaders**	**Employees**
Definitely yes	95.65	72.13
Rather yes	4.35	27.87
Rather no	0.00	0.00
Definitely no	0.00	0.00

Source: own elaboration.

As shown by the distribution of the responses, the leaders indicated a definite influence of the leader on building engagement. A similar position was expressed by the employees, indicating a decisive influence or choosing the answer 'rather yes'.

5. Conclusions

The research allowed to conclude that there was a high level of agreement and convergence of responses given to individual questions by the leaders and the employees. Both groups recognised that the basis of leadership is the common interpretation of the situation and environment as well as inspiring employees, whilst the most important challenge for leaders is inspiring employees to work in conditions of constant change, as well as balancing the needs of the company with those of employees. These issues are very important in the context of the characteristics of a good leader. Furthermore, it is important for a leader to be focused on people and relationships, to act as a coach developing and training their employees, and to be a planning and analysing strategist.

Authority, in the opinion of the leaders and the employees, is primarily built by a leader through respect for others and the ability to make decisions. This authority is strengthened through clear goal setting and consistency in action. A leader's motivational approach should primarily be expressed in professional and competent support of employees as well as giving praise, recognition, and feedback on the work done.

The most important traits of a leader should be a success-oriented attitude, determination, and decisiveness. According to the employees, self-confidence, openness, empathy, and emotional intelligence are also very important. Among the most important competencies they identified team building, openness to change, supporting development, and understanding business, whereas diligence, fairness, and decisiveness are the main values a leader should be guided by. A leader with such traits and competencies, guided by specified values, has a decisive impact on building employee engagement, according to the respondents.

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Przywództwo w organizacji z perspektywy liderów i pracowników

Streszczenie

Cel: Celem badań było określenie, jak postrzegane jest przywództwo w organizacji. Przedmiotem badania były wyzwania, przed jakimi stoją przywódcy w aktualnych warunkach funkcjonowania firm, oraz cechy, kompetencje oraz wartości, które są najważniejsze w skutecznym przewodzeniu.

Metodyka: Jako metodę badawczą przyjęto sondaż diagnostyczny z wykorzystaniem kwestionariusza ankiety. Sondaż ten wspomagany był wywiadem sterowanym.

Wyniki: 1) Podstawę przywództwa stanowi wspólna interpretacja sytuacji i otoczenia, ale też inspirowanie pracowników do pracy w warunkach ciągłych zmian, a także zrównoważenie potrzeb firmy z potrzebami pracowników. 2) Najważniejszymi cechami przywódcy winny być nastawienie na sukces, determinacja i zdecydowanie, pewność siebie, otwartość, empatia oraz inteligencja emocjonalna. Wśród najważniejszych kompetencji wskazywano budowanie zespołu, otwartość na zmianę, wspieranie rozwoju oraz rozumienie biznesu. Z kolei pracowitość, sprawiedliwość i stanowczość to główne wartości, jakimi powinien kierować się przywódca.

Implikacje i rekomendacje: Wnioski potwierdzają potrzebę dalszych pogłębionych badań dotyczących cech i kompetencji przywódców w odniesieniu do pracowników zróżnicowanych pokoleń.

Oryginalność/wartość: Główna wartością przeprowadzonych badań jest określenie wyzwań, przed jakimi stoją przywódcy w aktualnych warunkach funkcjonowania firm a także cech, kompetencji oraz wartości najważniejszych w skutecznym przewodzeniu.

Słowa kluczowe: przywództwo, kompetencje lidera, zaangażowanie