Doctoral Colloquium Submission

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The aim

The novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has caused many organizations to change their strategies and shift into the remote working environment due to health and safety precautions (Bartsch et al., 2020). Such a shift happened to be a great challenge for organizations, managers, and employees. For many, such a working environment is challenging. Kniffin et al. (2021) state that: "Covid-19 makes a clear vulnerability that employers and employees face". They argue that people need to learn to work differently like no previous generation ever did. For instance, leaders may run into further difficulties of not overseeing everyone's work and avoiding employee burnout and workforce disengagement. For this reason, the study aims to investigate whether transformational leadership is effective in such a challenging working environment while increasing employees' engagement levels.

Research questions

The empirical study proposes to answer and confirm the following question and hypothesis:

Q1: How is transformational leadership related to follower employee work engagement in a remote environment?

Null hypothesis (H^0): There is no (positive) correlation between transformational leadership and follower employee work engagement in a remote environment measured by the MLQ and UWES.

Hypothesis (H^1): There is a positive correlation between transformational leadership and follower employee work engagement in a remote environment measured by the MLQ and UWES.

Objectives

The objectives (steps) of the research are the following:

• Evaluate the literature and explore the effects of transformational leadership on employee work engagement;

• Investigate the relationship between transformational leadership and levels of employee work engagement in a virtual environment;

• Provide recommendations to organizations in the private sector on practical solutions and future proceedings to increase employees' engagement levels in a virtual environment.

Theoretical and practical gaps

Several studies have examined the relationship between leadership in a physical setting and increased follower employee engagement (Milhem, Muda and Ahmed, 2019; Rabiul and Yean, 2021). They all agree that the transformational leadership style used by leaders is significantly related to engagement and motivation among employees in various industries. The studies also agree that those factors have a significant correlation and influence the company's overall performance due to employees' commitment and shared goals. All these studies are relevant and can be beneficial as a guide; however, the current research uses a different context, approach and methodological stance. Moreover, no data exists on what effective leadership style is most suitable and appropriate to use in a virtual environment to increase employee engagement levels. Thus, there exists a theoretical gap due to the lack of academic research. Because the academic knowledge lacks the theoretical foundations on this topic, every organisation and professional involved in a full or partial virtual operation suffers from a practical side.

Li *et al*. (2020) suggested that many leadership studies made mistakes in having a smaller sample size for their data collection. They also note that studies have failed to use valid measures to investigate leadership. Echoing the aforementioned points, the current study aims to examine a large sample of participants and utilise validated leadership measures to recompense on past researchers' mistakes.

Alvesson and Einola's (2019) research criticize recent leadership studies due to: "shaky philosophical and theoretical foundation, tautological reasoning, weak empirical studies, nonsensical measurement tools, unsupported knowledge claims and a generally simplistic and out of date view of corporate life" (pp. 1). The researchers claim that the recent leadership studies are not reliable. Similarly, Liao (2017) also suggests that the current remote work research consists of validity issues due to its laboratory setting contexts. Therefore, both papers advise utilising field research designs to examine real-life phenomena and practical solutions to establish practical knowledge with a more appropriate philosophical and theoretical foundation and measurement tools with a unique view of corporate life. Hence, the current empirical study aims to respond to those issues by adopting a multiple case-study strategy and approaches in a real-life context.

Proposed methodology and approach

An explanatory sequential mixed-method design is proposed (Creswell, 2018). The mixed-methods design will follow a pragmatist philosophy that will contribute to practical solutions and future practice. Moreover, the research will use an adductive approach to examine the relationship between transformational leadership and follower work engagement. The empirical study will further clarify the effectiveness of transformational and transactional leadership on follower employee engagement using an abductive approach while confining it to a cross-sectional design. This approach's rationale will be determined by obtaining more powerful insights using quantitative and qualitative data collection approaches. Likewise, the epistemological assumption links to the chosen methodology, which states that knowledge should be examined using whatever tools are deemed necessary to solve the existing problem or issue (Fedyk & Xu, 2018).

The proposed research strategy is to develop a multiple case study on three large companies from different industries in the private sector. Yin (2018) suggests that the multiple-case design might be a better choice for using over single-case designs. He argues that single-case designs are more vulnerable; however, the researcher has more possibilities with more than one case. Yin further states that: "Analytic conclusions independently arising from two cases, as with two experiments, will be more powerful than those coming from a single case alone" (Yin, 2018, pp. 145). The rationale for choosing such a strategy was to provide practical solutions to existing problems or practices in a real-life context which links with the current study's overall aim.

The research design is proposed to use a non-probability sampling strategy to select a sample via purposive and volunteer sampling techniques. The empirical study will consist of two phases for data collection and analysis. The first phase will involve using the quantitative approach to test the hypothesis and existing theories on leadership and engagement within a remote work environment. Possibly, new insights will emerge from this stage. The second phase (qualitative study) will be used to assist in explaining, interpreting, and further exploring the findings of a quantitative study.

The first phase will collect data using Qualtrics – the online questionnaire platform. Two questionnaires will be assigned to the remote workers in the private sector. Firstly, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale UWES (Schaufeli et al., 2006) to measure their work engagement; secondly, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass & Avolio,

1995) to rate the leadership and behaviours of their superiors. The second independent phase of data collection will consist of using semi-structured interviews. The interviews will only include the participants who took part in the previous data collection phase and agreed to continue further study.

Data analysis will consist of thematic analysis, including qualitative NVivo software and descriptive and inferential statistics using IBM SPSS.

Potential benefits and contributions to knowledge

Readers who can potentially benefit from this research's impact include researchers, organizations in the private sector, front-line managers, and HR professionals. Also, anyone interested in gaining and implementing knowledge in their work concerning effective leadership, work engagement and remote work environment would benefit from this study's potential findings.

Furthermore, the contribution to knowledge could benefit scholars in either developing new theories or exploring further research avenues. Elsewhere, practitioners can apply such knowledge in real-life scenarios. The current study's central contribution lies in how the acquired knowledge could influence the way leaders behave in the virtual environment, potentially impacting employee work engagement levels.

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