WORK ENGAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP STYLES IN HUMAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS.

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**Abstract.** Current research on work engagement has increased significantly over the last decades. The rationale for that growing interest is that perception of its importance in predicting positive performance at work. Despite wide contribution on ‘organizational levers’ and ‘job resources’ predicting work engagement, researchers into this topic has devoted little attention to the role of leaders and their leadership style in explaining such result. By examining workers (N= 251) operating in 9 human service organizations in Italy, this study shows that work engagement is related to leadership style. The results allow for a more thorough and detailed understanding of how to manage human resources in Human Service Organizations through the lever of ‘leadership style’.

WORK ENGAGEMENT

According to most contributions, modern organizations need engaged employees. Several studies have shown that work engagement is a predictor of various indices of performance, such as: quality of service perceived by customers and better performance of the organizational units in terms of customer loyalty, profit and productivity.

The concept of work engagement here considered is the one defined by Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Romá and Bakker (2002, p. 74) as a “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication and absorption”. This concept is characterized by a three-dimensional structure comprising vigour, dedication and absorption.
Vigour represents high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one’s work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties. An employee who feels great vigour while working is highly motivated by the content of the job that he or she is performing (Mauno, Kinnunen & Ruokolainen, 2007).

Dedication is characterized by a strong psychological involvement in one’s meaningful work and “by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge” (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p.74). The concept of dedication appears to be much more related to the organization and shares some similarities with the concept of commitment (Mauno et al., 2007).

Absorption is characterized by total concentration on the work being done, for example, forgetting about time while working. According to many authors, this type of occurrence is more likely to happen in work situations that are characterized by high challenge or skill utilization (Eisenberger, Jones, Stinglhamber, Shanock & Randall, 2005; Gonzalez-Roma, Schaufeli, Bakker & Lloret, 2006).

It seems like the concept of work engagement is composed by a double dimension of one’s effort, in a sort of continuum between consciousness and unconsciousness. The one dimension more organizational related, that is dedication; the other more job related that is vigor and the last one, more task related that is absorption. While dedication and vigour implies some sort of identification that is with own organization and own job respectively; vigour and absorption involve some sort of energy and effort aimed at the job and the task respectively.

Just in order to visualize the concept that were just explained in figure 1 an interpretative framework is presented.

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Insert Figure 1 about here
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In this study, the three-dimensional model is used to relate the findings to earlier studies in similar empirical contexts (Hakanen, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2005; Jenaro, Flores, Orgaz, & Cruz, 2011; Mauno et al., 2007).

WORK ENGAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP STYLES

Among different levers of human resource development, many studies in organizational literature highlight the importance of leaders characters, abilities and behaviours (i.e. leadership styles) also relating those characteristics to individuals positive outcomes (Liu, Lepak, Takeuchi, & Sims, 2003; Rowold & Rohmann, 2009). Therefore we first posit the importance of the leader’s role and behaviour in affecting individual’s positive behaviour at work. That is:

Hp1: Leadership styles contribute in explaining individual’s engagement at work.

In particular, the aim of this paper is to investigate the relation between different leadership styles and engagement at work of employees.

Within the leadership literature there is a rich tradition of conceptualizing leadership styles. As one early example, path–goal theory identified four distinct styles of leader behaviours, that are: supportive leadership, directive leadership, achievement-oriented leadership, and participative leadership (House & Dressler, 1974). More recently, the dominant typology is that articulated by Bass (1997) suggesting a transactional–transformational dichotomy. A more recent study by Liu et al 2002 merging the two approaches consider four styles of leadership named: directive, transactional, transformational and empowering. The authors, specifically, highlight a possible fit between leadership style and the requirements of different employees groups. In other words, in the article it is proved a relation between relation
between employment modes and demand in leadership styles demanded. The authors refer to employment mode (e.g. contract oriented, internal development etc.) through some aspects of job such as: sample jobs (e.g. administrative, analyst, consulting) and underling objectives (e.g. temporary tasks or high commitment and long term relations).

Following this framework in this study a relation between different dimensions of behaviour and effectiveness of different leadership styles are studied.

In this study two specific leadership styles, which in my point of view are particularly related to employees development, will be considered as determinants of work engagement. These are participative leadership style that is “a non-directive form of role-clarifying behaviour which is gauged by the extent to which leaders allow subordinates to influence decisions by requesting input and contribution” (Ogbonna & Harris, 2000: 776) and instrumental leadership style, that is “akin to directive or transactional leadership and is designed to measure the extent to which leaders specify expectations, establish procedures, and allwate tasks” (Ogbonna & Harris, 2000: 776).

**Participative leadership style**

According to main literature, employees’ participation to decision making processes is positively related to organizational commitment, turnover (inversely), and employee productivity (Elele & Fields, 2010; Cotton, Vollrath, Froggatt, Lengnick-Hall, & Jennings, 1988; Kahnweiler & Thompson, 2000; Scott-Ladd, Travaglione, & Marshall, 2006; Martin, Parsons, & Bennett, 1995).

Further, previous studies suggest that, participation in decision making represent a key aspect. In fact, involvement of a variety of stakeholders in decision making makes it easier to identify innovative solutions and solve problems. Moreover, empirical evidence in non-for-profit organizations show that participation in decision making increases job satisfaction
(Borzaga & Tortia, 2006) and organizational commitment (Elele & Fields, 2010; Dailey, 1986).

In this vein, participative leadership can be considered as a determinant of individual performance in an organization. Participative leadership is characterized by joint decision making and aims at increase followers’ participation. When a leader play a participative style he or she favours employees’ voice in decisions, consulting them before making a decision related to their work (Bass, 1990). In this sense, we consider participative leadership as a critical leadership style as leading to increase in work performance, job involvement and identification. This style is particularly suitable to obtain high commitment and long term relationship (Lin et al., 2002). This, among the three dimensions of work engagement, is especially true for dedication when considering it as a state of enthusiasm, inspiration, feeling proud and meaningful work as suggested by Salanova and Schaufeli (2008) and vigor, in its meaning of willingness to invest in own job due to the high motivation coming from its specific content (Mauno et al., 2007). In this sense we posit that:

\[ Hp2: \text{Participative leadership is positively related to work engagement especially in its core dimension that are dedication and vigour.} \]

**Instrumental leadership style**

A leader who performs a directive, or instrumental, leadership style aims to guide followers’ participation to the organization and provide directions and support for the achievement of the objectives of the task (Bass, Valenzi, Farrow, & Solomon, 1975). This kind of leaders specify responsibilities and expectations, establish procedures and monitor work. In sum, they manage the important day-to-day operations of the organization.

In his study, Schmid (2006: 186) suggests that this leadership style is the most appropriate style for the “maintenance of the organizational system and for ensuring that workers are duly
rewarded for their tasks”. This style is considered as particularly functional in settings where leaders “have to make sure that the professional level of workers and services remains adequate and that any changes introduced in processes and programs are moderate, slow, and gradual” (Schmid, 2006: 186). In applying an instrumental leadership style leaders ensure, to their organizations, stability and a steady flow of resources. In this sense, we consider instrumental leadership as a critical leadership style as leading to increase work performance and job involvement especially when considering vigour in terms of its activation, persistence and goal oriented definition (Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008) and absorption in terms of highly goal oriented situations which imply total concentration. According to this we hypothesize that:

\[ H_{p3}: \text{Instrumental leadership is positively related to work engagement especially in its vigor and absorption dimensions.} \]

**EMPIRICAL SETTING**

This work intends to explore the concept of work engagement among workers. The context of the analysis are human service organizations (HSOs). Issues related to employees’ engagement are currently of great interest among researchers in the context of HSOs in which the individual dedication and effort is quite difficult to measure and to control for the nature of the job itself. In fact, for these professions - mainly occupied in the care to child, elder and handicapped - the “human component” is the key determinant of the job result while people employed in this sector are mainly intrinsically motivated (Mauno et al., 2007).

These prior considerations suggest HSOs as a particularly interesting context for examining the relation between HRD and work engagement.

The issue of leadership has been largely discussed in social sciences. However, despite its great significance, researchers appear to have “largely neglected the phenomenon of leadership” in these sort of contexts (Wallis & Dollery, 2005: 486). According to Schmid
(2009), in these kind of organizations leaders need to invest in transmitting organizational goals and a vision to their followers, as well as, organize resources in order to implement their vision. Further, they have to exhibit empathy and recognition to their followers, and actively stimulate them in day-by-day activities.

The type of HSOs here investigated differ from other types of organizations operating in the third sector. They operate in a procurement system for service provision to public sector, their management may tend to adopt a conformist behaviour in accordance to severe programmers dictated by external Institutions (Schmid, 2001). Leaders in these organizations should face both with complexity of competition and with the specific organizational identity. In considering this, the two kind of leadership styles – i.e. instrumental and participative - could be of specific interest for this kind of contexts (Schmid, 2006; 2009).

**METHOD**

**Data and Sample**

The data used for the purpose of this study were gathered in 2009 by administering a questionnaire to the operators of twelve social cooperatives in Italy. All of them operate in different people care sectors (i.e. elderly care, kindergarten, handicapped and minors care).

The questionnaire included questions on respondents background, the individual perception of leadership style and work engagement. The questionnaire was administered anonymously with the support of management of cooperatives, under the coordination of the author. The response rate has varied, consistent with previous research published in similar work environments (Pisanti et al., 2008), from 35 to 50% of operators depending on the cooperatives.
Out of 314 questionnaire fully filled for the purpose of the analysis 251 valid returned questionnaires were used. In fact managerial position were excluded as well as questionnaires coming from cooperatives that were unable to gather more than 10 respondents.

The questionnaire was based on scales already validated in previous studies in the literature. Work engagement was assessed with the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al., 2002). The original scale consists of three subscales of vigour, dedication, and absorption (altogether 17 items). Leadership styles were assessed with the scale developed by the original study by Ogbonna and Harris (2000) and was used to assess leadership styles that are participative and instrumental leadership style.

The summated variables were formed and scale reliability was tested with Cronbach’s alpha. All coefficients were above the 0.70 criterion (Nunnally 1978).

Also questions on respondents background were included, such as: age, gender, education, permanent position, years in the organization and years in the labour market.

**Scales**

*Dependent variable*

Work engagement was assessed with the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli et al. 2002) using the three subscales of vigour, dedication and absorption (altogether 17 items). Vigour was measured using six items (e.g., “At my work, I feel bursting with energy”; dedication was measured using five items (e.g., “I am enthusiastic about my job”) and absorption was measured using six items (e.g., “I feel happy when I am working intensely”). Items were scored on a seven-point frequency rating scale ranging from 0 (“never”) to 3 (“couple of times a month”) to 6 (“daily”).

*Independent variables*
Leadership styles were assessed with the scale developed by Ogbonna and Harris (2000). The original scale consists of three subscales measuring: participative, supportive and instrumental leadership style. For the purpose of this work only participative and instrumental leadership style are considered. Participative leadership style was measured with a 5-items scale (e.g. “Before making decisions, s/he considers what her/his subordinate have to say”). Instrumental leadership style, was measured with 4 items (e.g. “S/he explains the way tasks should be carried out”). Items were scored on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (Very false) to 7 (Very true).

Control variables

In the analysis we controlled for gender (1= male; 2= female) since it was found that for female the relation between procedural justice and work outcomes is stronger than for males (Sweeney & McFarlin, 1997). Also age, years into organization and in the labor market were considered as control variables as well as education.

Analysis

First the descriptive statistics of items were explored (SPSS 19.0 program) in order to highlight the main background characteristics of the sample.

In order to perform the further steps of the analysis, the summated variables were formed and scale reliability was tested with Cronbach’s alpha. All coefficients were above the 0.70 criterion (Nunnally 1978).

Because 9 organizations were used to generate this sample, a one-way ANOVA was used to test if the groups were similar enough to be combined for subsequent data analysis. Results show that belonging to a organization had not a significant effect of the on work engagement. In order to assess the potential threat of collinearity, we have estimated the variance inflation
factors (VIF) and found that no variable had a variance-inflation factor greater than 2.015 which is below the cut-off point of 10 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006) mitigating concerns of multicollinearity.

In order to test the above hypothesis a hierarchical multiple regressions was performed on each dependent variable. For the analyses, control variables were entered first and were followed by a block entry of leadership styles variables i.e. instrumental leadership and participative leadership.

**Results**

Males were 9.7% and 90.3% were female. The 85.9% have previous working experiences in other sectors and 73.6% have a permanent position. Among the respondents 23.5% have a degree, 37% a high school diploma and the rest a professional diploma or inferior education level. The average age is 37.5 years old (SD=9.99), average years in labour market is 16.5 years (SD=10.7), average years into the organization is 5.1 (SD=4.58).

In table 1 results of correlation analysis are presented.

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Insert Table 1 about here
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In table 2 the results of the three hierarchical regression analysis are reported. A regression analysis was computed for each of the three dependent variable that are: vigor, dedication and absorption.

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Insert Table 2 about here
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Regarding the control variables, we found that, work engagement, coherently with previous evidence (Sweeney & McFarlin, 1997), is positively related to gender. In this analysis, however, it is verified just for one of the three dimensions of work engagement that is vigour. Therefore, being female is much more related to vigour when leadership styles are involved. Further education level was found negatively related to absorption. However, the three models just considering control variables are not statistically significant for the dependent variables (p>.05).

Results highlight that adding leadership styles in the three models show a substantial and significant (p<.05) increase in explanatory power from the first to the second step of the regression analysis. Respectively an increase of variance explained ($R^2$ adjusted) of +13% for vigour, +8% for dedication and +14% for absorption. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is supported by the data.

At the same step of the analysis, as reported in Table 2, it is highlighted that the effect of participative leadership style on vigour ($B=0.22; p<0.05$) and dedication ($B=0.25; p<0.01$), is statistically significant; however, it is not for absorption ($B=0.11; p>0.05$). This result show that participative leadership style explains better vigour and dedication than absorption. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is supported.

Instrumental leadership style is positively and significantly related to vigour ($B=.22; p<.05$) and absorption ($B=.33; p<.001$) but it is not to dedication ($B=.10; p>.05$). Data suggest that instrumental leadership explains better vigour and absorption than dedication. Thus, also hypothesis 3 is supported.

**Discussion**
The paper can give some useful contributions both in the theoretical debate and for management in this sector. First, it can enrich a debate linking literature on human resource development (HRD) and particularly on leadership styles and work engagement. On the managerial implication side, recommendations for the implementation of individual engagement through leadership styles are given. The outcome of the study, in fact, could represent a helpful suggestion, in order to promote the development of those HRM practices able to develop supervisors’ competencies in managing co-workers increasing work engagement among professionals in human service organizations.

The empirical evidence of the present study provide qualified support for the hypothesis stated.

First, the results confirm the importance of leadership in ensuring high individual performance. In particular, it is highlighted the relationship between participative leadership and the core dimensions of work engagement that are dedication and vigour. In fact, coherently with past investigations, the individual participation to decision making may impact positively on personal satisfaction since supervisor recognition of being mature enough to participate to decision making processes booster individuals sense of proud and add meaning to their work, that is directly related to the dimension of dedication.

At the same time, the relationship between instrumental leadership and absorption and vigour is demonstrated. In this sense, a leader who support employees for the achievement of their objectives and that ensures the stability of work and organization, favours positive individual operation-oriented behaviours, that is coherent with the dimension of vigour and absorption.

For an individual to be engaged all aspects of work engagement should be involved, from the more operative dimension of day by day working to the identification with the own organization and job. So that through a sort of “circle” individuals reinforce their behaviours
through different dimensions that, according to model represented in figure 2, are identification and inertia momentum, i.e. experience of the task. Organizational and job identification supports day by day tasks as well as experiencing day by day task reinforce organization’s and job’s identification. In this circle leaders could play a substantial role through supplying to employees information and resources (through instrumental leadership) and supplying to employees the opportunity to reinforce their own resources and capabilities through involving them in the decision-making process (participative leadership).

Implications

This study has some implications both for research and practice. As regards theory and research, our findings contribute to a thin literature on leadership styles in HSOs and try to shed further light on antecedents of positive organizational behaviours among employees.

As regards implications for practice, the paper suggests that leadership style appears to be a “practical” tool for answering HPOs need for engaged workforce in a sector characterized by service specificities and high levels of environment complexity. Special attention should be given, therefore, to the different leadership styles to be used for boosting work engagement. Our results try to demonstrate the existence of a not-too-costly organizational mechanism, that is leadership style, for making people more engaged. Therefore, managers should be more aware on the importance of the impact of leaders’ behaviour on employees performance and morale. Therefore ad-hoc training programs should be implemented in order to develop a instrumental-empowering leadership style for supervisors.
Limitations and Future Research

This analysis has some limitations which could however stimulate future research. First, the study is cross-sectional. Second, the variables were measured with a common method and source. Consequently, there may be some systematic bias (common method variance) when we ask the same respondent about leadership style and their experience of work engagement. Fourth, the context of our study is Italian HSOs and the results must be interpreted accordingly.

I found leadership styles especially connected to perceived work engagement in NPOs. This raises two further questions mainly related to the national and organizational culture: 1) what would be the findings in other kind of organizations? 2) Would the findings remain the same in different national contexts?

A longitudinal approach would also be advisable. That would enable the researchers to evaluate to what extent changes in leadership styles would result in changes in work engagement.

References


Figure 1 – An interpretation of Work Engagement concept

- DEDICATION
- VIGOR
- ABSORPTION

Organization → Job → Task

Consciousness → Inertia

Figure 2 – Work engagement dimensions and leadership styles

Participative Leadership

- DEDICATION
- VIGOR
- ABSORPTION

Instrumental Leadership

Consciousness/Identity → Work Experience

Inertia/Work Experience
### Table 1 – Means, standard deviation and correlation of variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St. Dev.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
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<td>1 – vigour</td>
<td>5,719</td>
<td>1,059</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2 - dedication</td>
<td>5,949</td>
<td>1,194</td>
<td>.672**</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>3 - absorption</td>
<td>5,211</td>
<td>1,223</td>
<td>.596**</td>
<td>.613**</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>4 – age</td>
<td>37,530</td>
<td>9,992</td>
<td>-.044</td>
<td>-.083</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>5- gender</td>
<td>1,903</td>
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<td>.188*</td>
<td>.167*</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>-.020</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>6 - education</td>
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<td>.013</td>
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<td>7 - years in the organization</td>
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<td>-.012</td>
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<td>-.073</td>
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<td>-.187**</td>
<td>.446**</td>
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<td>9- participative leadership style</td>
<td>5,202</td>
<td>1,610</td>
<td>.312*</td>
<td>.334**</td>
<td>.327**</td>
<td>-.147*</td>
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<td>10 - instrumental leadership style</td>
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Note. Sig. (2-tailed) * p<.05, ** p<.01

### Table 2 – Regression analysis.

<table>
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<th>Predictors</th>
<th>VIGOUR</th>
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<th>ABSORPTION</th>
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<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Step 1</td>
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<td>.08</td>
<td>**</td>
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<tr>
<td>gender</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.17</td>
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<td>education</td>
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<td>.00</td>
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<td>years into the organization</td>
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<td>.03</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>permanent position</td>
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<td>-.12</td>
<td>*</td>
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<td>Step2 participative leadership style</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>instrumental leadership style</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall Adj. R2</td>
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<td>.16</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in R2</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.08</td>
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Note. Sig. * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001