

The influence of Leadership Style on Employee Wellbeing during a pandemic

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Abstract

The influence of leadership style on employee wellbeing in a pandemic such as Covid-19 has not received much attention in the leadership literature. Apparently, available literature seems to portray leadership and employee wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic from a largely psychological perspective. The potential for integrating the leadership with employee wellbeing literature is great and is likely to be beneficial for both theory and practice. This paper is a systematic literature review focusing on the relationship between five leadership styles and employee wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic. Data were from secondary sources, mainly recently published journal articles on the impact of leadership on wellbeing during Covid-19. Findings indicate that there is a positive and significant relationship between leadership style and employees' wellbeing. Findings also reflect that employee wellbeing in a pandemic such as Covid-19 is maintained and restored through creativity, maintenance of relationships, minimisation of safety related concerns, social support and empowerment.

Keywords: Leadership, Leadership style, Employee wellbeing, Pandemic

Introduction

It is not a secret anymore that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected employee wellbeing quite significantly. The influence of leadership style is decisive in a crisis and its response (Usman, Ghani, Cheng and Iqbal, 2021). This paper reviews the relationship between five leadership styles and employee wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic. It assumes that a good deed by a leader provokes the follower to feel obliged to respond with positive deeds. The thinking here is that leaders who practice certain styles of leadership can help employees in a crisis-induced workplace. The paper predicates the simple principle that people tend to feel obliged to return favours after people do favours for them. It focuses on the leadership styles that are likely to impact on employees' wellbeing in a positive manner. Literature review thus focuses on leadership styles that influence employee wellbeing in a pandemic. Firstly, by utilizing a type of adaptive leadership, that emphasizes a predisposed willingness to change oneself, employees become creative. Secondly, leaders should practice supportive leadership to maintain employee relationships. Thirdly, leaders should practice safety transformational leadership to minimise employees' safety concerns. Forth, leaders should practice identity leadership so that they minimise employees' feeling of alienation and loneliness at work. Finally, leaders should practice participative leadership so that they empower their employees. Therefore, in this paper the assumption is that leadership style can enhance employees' wellbeing in a crisis-induced work place. Looking forward, the paper provides a systematic literature review focusing on the relationship between the five leadership styles mentioned above and employee wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Related Literature

Literature review in this article focuses on the leadership styles that influence employees' wellbeing in a pandemic such as the one brought by Covid-19. All around the world, employers are increasingly worried about wellbeing issues presented by the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has brought potentially lethal employee wellbeing consequences.

Employee Wellbeing

Employees' wellbeing consists of three dimensions that are as follows: psychological, physical and social wellbeing (Van De Voorde et al., 2012). They state that psychological well-being relates to happiness and subjective experience at work, whereas social wellbeing relates to relationships and quality of interaction between employees or between employees and managers. Physical well-being is termed as the health of workers. It relates to those situations that may give rise to strain, psychological distress, physical illness, and burnout among employees. Psychological and physical well-being centre on individuals mainly, and social well-being focuses on interaction with others.

Leadership

Perhaps the question to ask now should be; what is leadership? Whilst various definitions are available, this paper considers the following definitions of leadership, which are in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Leadership is:

- A predisposed willingness to change oneself (Adaptive Leadership).
- Building employees' resilience and self-efficacy (Supportive Leadership).
- Employee safety consciousness (Safety Transformational Leadership).
- The shared sense of "we" and "us" (Identity Leadership)
- Nurturing employees' workplace thriving and helping behaviours (Participative Leadership).

Leaders should therefore adapt their leadership style according to the changing situation.

Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership is that inclination to change oneself in response to changes in the environment (Fuller, Marler, Bajaba and Lovett, 2018). Adaptive leaders focus on maintaining a high compatibility with their environment. They are thus conscious of the changes that take place and are willing to change the way they think and behave to adapt to new situations. Adaptive leaders have been found to remain composed when the situation is stressful (Fuller et al., 2018). They have been found to possess competences needed to positively accept change and derive benefits from it (ibid, 2018). Bajaba, Bajaba, Igarni, Basahal and Basahel (2021) are of the view that adaptive leaders are quite effective when it comes to handling emergencies and job related stress. They are good at solving problems, learning and adapting to new situations including those relating to relationships and communication. Such competences are necessary when it comes to restructuring jobs and adjusting the way set tasks are organised.

Bajaba et al., (2021) carried out a study to determine the role of adaptive behaviour (personality) in the rise of effective leaders during the covid-19 pandemic. Findings indicate that leaders with an adaptive personality are more likely to have high levels of belief in their capacity to lead during the times of a pandemic such as covid-19. The study further found that such high levels of belief are in an important way related to motivation to lead.

Leaders who demonstrated adaptive behaviour were identifiable by their calmness in times of difficulty and uncertainty whilst at the same time quickly looking for ways to deal with such times (ibid, 2021). They solved problems by creating new ideas and were constantly on the lookout for new ways of improving their work. Bajaba et al., (2021) are of the view that such leaders welcomed employees' views and cooperated with them.

Supportive Leadership

Supportive leadership are those attitudes, actions, behaviours, and communications by leaders that enable employees to work effectively, productively, and appropriately (Muller et al., 2009). It helps to sustain and improve employee physical well-being. Supportive behaviours such as encouragement, appreciation, and availability of leaders when needed by employees to respond to their needs help them to lower their distress, burnout, and other mental issues, thus improving their physical well-being (Um-e-Rubbab, Farid, Iqbal, Saeed, Irfan and Akhtar, 2021).

Similarly, supportive leadership behaviours such as lending the support in time of need, understanding and balancing the staff concerns, and keeping workers updated about upcoming issues fulfils employees' needs related to social well-being (ibid, 2021). Employees receiving positive emotions and positive resources from their leader spill over to other employees. Thus a pollution of positivity develops, enabling employees to maintain the relationships and breaking the knots with their family and friends because of sustained social well-being.

Findings from a study by Um-e-Rubbab, Farid, Iqbal, Saeed, Irfan and Akhtar (2021) confirmed that there was a positive and significant relationship between supportive leadership and employees' psychological well-being. This study is consistent with many other studies that claim that employees' well-being hinge on certain leadership styles. This entails that employees' psychological well-being is maintained and restored through supportive behaviour, concern and empathy of the leader. Leaders at all levels are therefore encouraged to use supportive strategies to build psychological well-being. Psychological well-being of employees is not only important for themselves but also critical for their workplace, and loved ones.

Findings from Um-e-Rubbab et al. (2021) illustrate that positive emotions of leaders through their empathy, listening, and nurturing behaviour developed followers' psychological capital and then spilled in positive emotions among them to improve their well-being. This study also found that supportive behaviour of leaders influenced employees' well-being. Existing studies suggested that certain organizational or psychological factors (e.g., self-efficacy, hope, work characteristics) influence the relationship between leadership and well-being. The study by Um-e-Rubbab et al (2021) supported their notion and highlighted the role of supportive leadership in building employees' hope for better future, optimism for work challenges, confidence in themselves, and high resilience for meeting Covid-19 chaos, thus building their psychological capital, which in turn helps them to improve their well-being. So psychological capital of employees proved to be an effective mediator for the relationship between supportive leadership and employees' well-being.

Safety Transformational Leadership

A study by Irshad, Majeed and Kattak (2021) reveals that leaders can use safety specific transformational leadership as a suitable leadership style that combines with employee safety consciousness and dampens the covid-19 perceived risk among employees. This reduction in perceived risk improves psychological well-being among employees. This decrease in risk leaves a positive impact on employees by enhancing their psychological well-being. The study concludes that safety transformational leadership and safety consciousness among employees decrease Covid-19 perceived risk, leading to an increase in the psychological well-being of employees. These results are consistent with existing studies which have shown that safety specific leadership promotes perceived safety and other positive outcomes among employees (Conchie and Donald, 2009; Johnson, 2019; Smith et al., 2020). A decrease in covid-19 perceived risk causes improvement in the mental health of employees when the leadership take solid measures to ensure the safety of workers (Ahmed et al., 2020; Bashirian et al., 2020; Dirani et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2020b; Haque, 2021).

Identity Leadership

Identity Leadership proposes that the self-concept of individuals not only rests on their personal identity ("I" or "me") but also on their social identity ("we" or "us"), that is derived from memberships in social groups. Krug, Haslam, Otto and Steffens (2021) carried out a study in which they examined how identity leadership is associated with the well-being of employees in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, they examined how both leaders and team members' identity leadership is associated with employees' social identity continuity and through this with their job satisfaction, burnout and loneliness at work. They drew on the social identity perspective to explore predictors of the work-related well-being of employees in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, they examined the role of people's sense of social identity continuity in work-related group membership in supporting well-being during the pandemic. Results indicate that work-related social identity continuity relates to an increase in Job satisfaction and reduced loneliness among employees.

Results revealed that to the extent that employees perceived greater social identity continuity, they were more satisfied with their work and felt less lonely. Furthermore, mediation analyses revealed indirect effects of team members' identity entrepreneurship on job satisfaction and loneliness via an increase in social identity continuity. Results suggest that to foster employees' health and well-being in times of disruption, organizations might put in place practices that allow employees to maintain a sense of 'we-ness' at work by involving not only formal leaders but also other members of the organization.

These results have important implications for leaders in organizations as well. In particular, by pointing to the importance of social identity continuity for well-being at work in times of change, it provides organizations with a guiding framework for understanding how to maintain their employees' health and

engagement during the current (and possibly other) crises. Results also indicate that if employees are able to stay connected with their work-related groups, this can support their well-being in the face of the range of challenges brought about by this covid-19 pandemic. Findings also align with emerging evidence that shared identity leadership has unique benefits for teams. For minimising employees' feeling of alienation and loneliness at work instance, Fransen et al. (2020) found that sport team members' health were impacted as much by the leadership of the formal leader as it was by the leadership of informal leaders. Extending this body of work, the present work found that it was perceptions of identity entrepreneurship on the part of fellow team members that was associated with members' perceived continuity of work groups and greater satisfaction with work and lower loneliness.

These findings suggest that organizations should not rely only on formal leaders to maintain a shared sense of "us" in times of crisis, but should also encourage other members of the organization to do the same. Indeed, the strong association between the identity leadership of managers and that of team members suggests that this may be an important (and hitherto unstudied) aspect of identity leadership.

Participative Leadership

Participative leadership is that action that empowers the employees and offer them prospects to be involved in independent decision-making processes. Active involvement in decision-making encourages employees to trust in their leader's abilities and skills. When employees gain experience and skills, they get appreciation, and their leader recognises their novel ideas and skills. This belief in them by their leaders urges them to carry out additional tasks and responsibilities that enhance the organization's competitiveness and growth (Lu et al., 2015).

A participative leader stimulates motivation via involving employees in the decision-making process; this involvement makes them feel that leaders value their ideas and suggestions. Consequently, the autonomy of sharing ideas and low control of a participative leader intrinsically motivate followers to exhibit more helping behaviours (Sagnak, 2016).

Usman, Ghani, Cheng, Farid and Iqbal (2021) carried out a study to investigate participative leaders' impact on employees' outcomes, in particular employees' workplace thriving and helping behaviours while also exploring the moderating effect of a leader's behavioural integrity. Specifically, the idea was to determine whether participative leaders help employees in a crisis-induced work environment to nurture them to thriving and increase their helping behaviours. Importantly, this study aimed at contributing to a participative leadership role in the context-19 context by exploring two critical issues.

Findings indicate that participative leadership positively relates to employees' thriving and helping behaviours during the crisis. They also reveal that the relationship between participative leadership and employees' work-related outcomes was contingent on the manager's perceived integrity.

The study made three distinct theoretical contributions. First, this study advances the participative leadership literature in the novel COVID-19 context by showing that the participative leadership style nurtures employees' workplace thriving and helping behaviours. Consistent with prior studies, results show a positive relationship between participative leadership and employees' workplace thriving. An important characteristic of participative leadership is embedded in the leader-subordinate relationship, which genuinely gives followers greater discretion, attention, support, and empowerment in decisions (Nystrom, 1990), ultimately enhancing their vitality and learning motivation at work. Second, participative leaders' behaviours stimulate the development of a smooth relationship with helping behaviours. These findings of a positive relationship between participative leadership and work-related outcomes extend the previous empirical findings (Chan, 2019; Chang et al., 2019) from the leadership level to the subordinate level.

Theoretical Framework

The theory informing this paper is the Social Exchange theory (Blau, 1964). This theory insinuates that a good deed by a leader provokes the follower to feel obliged to respond with positive deeds. In other words, employees who observe their leader as exemplary are likely to feel compelled by such leadership and will feel more interested in the work assigned to (Liborius, 2014). This implies that leaders who practice adaptive leadership are likely to instil the ability or tendency to adapt to different situations during a crisis such as covid-19 at a workplace. Equally, a leader who practices supportive leadership during a crisis such as Covid-19 is likely to enhance employees' psychological capacities i.e. hope, self-efficacy, confidence and optimism. Similarly, a leader who practices safety transformational leadership is likely to enable employees

to be conscious of their safety. Those who practice identity leadership are likely to instil the shared sense of “we” and “us” in their employees. Finally, those who practice participative leadership is most likely to nurture employees’ helping behaviours. Relying on the Social Exchange view point, this paper argues that employees who are inspired by their leaders’ leadership practices as enunciated above may succeed more and offer helping behaviours towards co- employees.

Methodology

A systematic literature review focusing on the influence of leadership style on employee wellbeing during a pandemic was undertaken. A systematic literature is a means of identifying, evaluating and interpreting all available research relevant to a particular research question, or topic area, or phenomenon of interest (Kitchenham, 2004). The purpose of this review was to determine the relationship between five leadership styles and employee wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic. The intention was to determine how the leadership styles influenced employee wellbeing. Data were from secondary sources, mainly recently published journal articles on the impact of leadership on wellbeing during Covid-19. The data from the sources were formed one theme: The influence of leadership styles on employee wellbeing during a pandemic. This theme cross-referenced with relevant literature to provide an in depth understanding of the arguments and points raised.

Results and Discussion

Results from this review suggest that there is a positive and significant relationship between leadership style and employees’ wellbeing. For example, Bajaba et al., (2021)’s study clearly brings out the important relationship between adaptive personality and adaptive performance which collectively are inherent in adaptive leadership. They clearly state that the former is a potential precursor to what constitutes effective leadership during the unprecedented covid-19 pandemic. The study further reveals that leader self-belief and motivation to lead during the pandemic help to clarify the significant relationship between adaptive personality and adaptive performance. By implication, leaders with adaptive personality due to their increased adaptive performance have increased motivation and confidence to lead during a pandemic such as covid-19. According to the social exchange theory, such leaders pass on this adaptive personality and adaptive performance to their subordinates (employees) who in turn become cooperative, creative and become receptive to other people’s views.

The study by Um-e-Rubbab et al. (2021) provides various implications about supportive leadership for employees. Firstly, the study suggests that psychological capital and well-being are personal resources, which help them to work effectively. These depend on and can be built and strengthened by provision of a supportive work environment. McGilton (2010) stresses the importance of supportive leadership for employees’ positive attitudes at work. Through supportive leadership, employees find their leader available to them, listening, empathetic, and reliable. Leaders should therefore keep their workers aware of changes within the work environment. This enables them to work with confidence, knowing that their leaders appreciate their limitless efforts. This will help them to maintain their well-being and help them control their fear during the pandemic. Effective communication and expression of respect and gratitude are key factors for a supportive workplace environment (McGilton, 2010).

Um-e-Rubbab et al. (2021)’s study’s findings stressed that leaders should be encouraged to use supportive leadership styles to enhance employees’ well-being. Certain styles, i.e., supportive leadership, can help employees to build their psychological resources that is psychological capital (hope, resilience, self-efficacy, and optimism) to face the chaos of a pandemic. It is very important to build and maintain the employees’ psychological resources to restore their emotional, social, and physical well-being, and only then, they would be able to take the better care of their loved ones. Leaders at all levels need to know and appreciate the issues, challenges, and difficulties their staff is facing to better know and empathize with them.

Supportive leaders may lessen staff’s tensions and anxieties associated with Covid-19 by lending an ear to hear and shoulder to rely on.

From Irshad et al., (2021)’s study it is quite apparent that the covid-19 pandemic requires leaders to shift their focus from meeting organisational goals to ensuring the safety of employees. Implications from the study suggest that leaders must adopt safety-specific transformational leadership to minimize employees’ safety-related concerns and enhance their psychological well-being. Employees are therefore encouraged to provide suggestions for enhancing safety, which may involve abandoning any outdated safety procedure or

following more effective safety guidelines. Most importantly, leaders should act as role models by following safety protocols and encouraging others to follow the standard safety procedures.

Krug, Haslam, Otto and Steffens (2021)'s study on identity leadership sheds light on ways in which COVID-19 has influenced employees' health and well-being by compromising their sense of social identity continuity in the workplace. It also speaks to the capacity for identity leadership—especially on the part of other team members—to buffer employees from the impact of identity discontinuity by cultivating a sense of shared social identity in the workplace. In this, the findings speak to claims that social identity is critical not only for leadership but also for health.

Indeed, precisely because identity leadership centres on the creation of shared sense of “we” and “us,” it can also be an important way of staving off the health-threatening effects of social disconnection and isolation e.g., in the form of loneliness. In the context of a pandemic, whose effects are, as much through increased physical distancing as through the spread of the virus itself, this capacity to build social connection and solidarity would seem to be particularly important? Moreover, because the need to build and maintain social identity is so great (Jetten et al., 2020), it is important to recognize that this is a task that should not be left to leaders to perform on their own. After all, if it is the case that “we are all in this together”, we all need to be in the business of making this call to solidarity ring true.

Usman, Ghani, Cheng, Farid and Iqbal (2021)'s study provides a few important practice implications for organisations. It shows that participative leadership is relevant to the employee context. Participative leaders delegate greater empowerment to their followers and encourage them to actively participate in decision-making, which positively influences their workplace thriving and arouses more helping behaviours. Hence, leaders could reduce an employee's reluctance and reservations about participating by displaying adequate participative leadership, especially in a pandemic (i.e., covid-19). For example, leaders could extend opportunities and more support for participation, accept their employees' recommendations, consider a varied range of decision choices, and offer adequate information and resources to subordinates who then effectively accomplish the tasks they will be participating.

Building on these findings, leaders are encouraged to learn and use participative leadership behaviours. Furthermore, organisations should take significant steps to facilitate the development of participative leadership behaviours to nurture employees' thriving and helping behaviours. For example, organizations could initiate advanced leadership development programs (i.e., coaching, mentoring, and structured workshops), where participative leadership behaviours are learnt and stimulated. Moreover, organizations should also pay attention to the leader's behavioural integrity because this has substantial benefits for supportive leadership, well-being (i.e., thriving), and helping behaviours. A leader's behavioural integrity improves via systematic performance management, training, and personal development practices.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the leadership styles that influence employee's wellbeing during the covid-19 pandemic. Of particular significance in this paper is how the leadership theory integrates with the employee wellbeing literature thereby bringing in potential benefits for both theory and practice. Results reveal that there is a positive and significant relationship between leadership style and employees' wellbeing. These results suggest that employee wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic era is maintained and restored through creativity, maintenance of relationships, minimisation of safety related concerns, social support and empowerment. It is thus incumbent upon leaders to improve the wellbeing stamina of their workforce as they navigate a course during the extraordinary global challenge - the covid-19 pandemic.

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