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# Leadership Influence on Work Satisfaction Level in COVID-19 times in Romanian SMES

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**Abstract**

*Choosing the right leadership style is a constant concern in business management because it can directly influence its financial results. Through this paper, we wanted to check to what extent the leadership style can influence the level of satisfaction of the employee, his desire to change jobs, and to what extent it accentuates or improves the effects generated by the COVID-19 pandemic (anxiety, work from home, the economic crisis generated]. We also wanted to check to what extent a high degree of job satisfaction can negatively influence the employee's desire to look for a new job. In the empirical research, we used the MLQ questionnaire to determine the management style, and we used the Likert scale for other variables.*

**Keywords***: MLQ, job satisfaction, leadership, COVID-19*

**JEL Classification :** M00, M10, M20

## Introduction

The organizations talk and, at the same time, they want the employees to be motivated, and their level of job satisfaction to be high in order to be able to fulfill the objectives and performances of the company they work for. It is very important for each manager to know their own employees in order to know what is important for them to achieve the desired results. The role of the manager is very important in a company being the connection between the employee and the company. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many things have changed, and managers are facing difficult situations, such as work at home, reorganizations, job losses. At the same time, the leadership style of the manager has a direct impact on his subordinates and because of this we want to find out which of the leadership styles can positively motivate employees, in the new post Covid context.

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## 1. Literature review

To lead means to show the way, to guide, to direct, to induce to go towards a certain given result or objective. Three major leadership styles have been identified in the literature: transactional, transformational and laissez-faire [Lowe KB et al., 1996]; [Chemers MM, 1997; Avolio BJ et al., 1999; Antonakis J., House RJ, 2002; Dumdum UR et al., 2002; Judge TA, Small RF, 2004; Kirkbride P., 2006; Kurfi AK, 2009; Stanfield AW, 2009; Buon T., 2014].

Transformational leadership is the most popular theory, as it represents the close bond formed between leaders and their followers, where leaders motivate and inspire people through their vision, their high ethical and moral standards. Organizations led by transformational leaders have higher levels of performance and give subordinates self-confidence to persist in the face of obstacles that can lead to exceptional performance [Buon T., 2014]. This concept was first introduced by James MacGregor Burns and later developed by Bernard Bass, [Avolio BJ et al., 1999] describing four factors of transformational leadership: intellectual stimulation; individualized attention; inspirational motivation and idealized influence.

Transactional leadership, in contrast to transformational leadership, is concerned with maintaining the normal flow of operations through which disciplinary power is used and a range of incentives to motivate and reward employees for performance and penalties for failure to meet objectives [Bass BM 2007; Jung DI, Avolio BJ, 1999; Yaffe T., Kark R., 2011; Buon T., 2014]. This type of leader focuses on the structure, role expectations and ways of rewarding the employee" [Sellgreen F. et al., 2008], following the premise that if you want something from your staff, you have to offer something in return, and the mechanism used must be authoritative and direct to influence employee behavior. Some authors argue that transactional leadership involves two main factors: a situational reward, i.e. an exchange process between leaders and employees, including appropriate performance rewards; and exceptional management, which is a process in which the leader takes appropriate corrective action to prevent mistakes and achieve organizational goals [McLaggan E. et al., 2013].

Transactional leadership allows employees to meet their personal goals and focus on organizational goals through measures such as improving quality, and customer service, reducing costs and improving production. Other studies show that transactional leadership has a significant and positive effect on the employees' continued commitment [Clinbell S. et al., 2013].

Laissez-faire leadership allows employees to work as a team and they are given complete freedom to select and set their own goals and to monitor their own work [Kurfi AK, 2009]. This style is also known as the non-leadership style as it is characterized by the absence of transformational or transactional leadership and a lack of interaction between leader and employees. This leadership is characterized by leaders who avoid making decisions and do not take care and responsibility in increasing their unity, department, or organization [Kirkbride P., 2006]. This style works well if the situation and the environment are conducive to promoting the freedom to make decisions [Stanfield AW, 2009].

In 1978, Burns identified two styles of leadership: transformational and transactional. He further developed the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire [MLQ] in order to assess the two leadership styles and their relationship to work efficiency and individual job satisfaction.

Other researchers [Li, Tan & Teo, 2012; Morales G., Jiménez A. and Gutiérrez G., 2012; Grant, 2012], developed the questionnaire [MLQ] emphasizing that transformational leadership includes: idealized influence or charisma; inspirational motivation; intellectual stimulation; individualized consideration and transactional leadership includes: Contingent reward and exceptional management. Using charisma or idealized influence [II] style, the leader inspires in his followers' feelings such as pride, faith, and respect and has the gift to show the followers what is important [Bass, 1985; Bass et.al. 1987]. To focus on collective, not just individual interests, leaders seek to instill confidence in their followers, leaders, and the organization in which they work [G. Morales et.al. 2012; Grant 2012]. According to the Inspirational motivation [IM] style leaders provide inspiration by motivating employees largely by communicating their expectations, which in turn emphasizes to employees the importance of organizational outcomes and values [Moynihan, P. & Wright, 2012; G Morales et.al. 2012; Ionescu, L. 2013]

According to the leadership style of intellectual stimulation [IS], leaders encourage their followers to think in new ways and emphasize the importance of problem-solving and the use of reasoning before taking action, helping followers to fulfill their mission [Bass, 1985; Bass et.al. 1987; Grant, 2012; Moynihan et al., 2012]. Intellectual stimulation promotes employee intelligence by stimulating them to be innovative and creative [Morales G. et.al. 2012; Stegaroiu, Radu, Simsek & Tabirca, 2020].

Individualized Leadership [IL] leadership style focuses on changing followers' reasons to take into account the ethical and moral implications of both their goals and actions [Lopez D. et.al., 2013] which also involves personalizing interactions with followers [Grant, 2012]. According to this style, leaders treat their followers as individuals, care about them, know them in detail and listen to their ideas and concerns [Varela, N. et.al., 2020].

According to the contingent reward [CR] style, the leader rewards his followers for achieving the required performance, the reward being directly proportional to the effort and level of performance [Varela, N. et.al., 2020; Avolio, 1999]. This style includes elements that represent a process of interpersonal exchange, as well as elements that represent recognition and praise, the latter being more transformational than transactional [Yukl, 1999].

The exceptional management style [ExM] could be divided into two sub-factors: active versus passive [Hater & Bass, 1988]. Exceptionally active management focuses on monitoring task execution to detect any problems that may arise, to correct them and to maintain predetermined performance levels [Avolio, 1999]. Passive exception management tends to react only after problems have become serious by taking corrective action and often avoids making any decisions [Avolio, 1999; Hinkin T., 2008].

While implementing Laissez-faire [LF] leadership style, managers avoid making decisions, do not take responsibility, do not use their authority, being a non-response to situations that deserve attention. From an empirical point of view, there was an overlap between this style and management, except that it was difficult for the respondents to distinguish between the two because their elements converged towards passive leadership [Hinkin T. 2008]. Empirical analyzes of leadership styles have determined that: laissez-faire leadership has a significant but negative effect on emotional engagement [Clinbell S. et al., 2013]; there is a strong positive correlation between transformational and transactional leadership and employee performance and a strong negative correlation between laissez-faire and employee performance [Salman Z. et al., 2011], respectively transactional leadership has a positive, strong association and significant with commitment, but the

motivational level was low and insignificant in laissez-faire leadership [Chaudhry AQ, Javed H., 2012].

Several meta-analyzes have strongly argued that transformational and transactional leadership are positively related to various indicators of subjective and objective performance, while laissez-faire style has a negative influence on them [Lowe KB et al., 1996; Dumdum UR et al., 2002; Judge TA, Piccolo RF, 2004].

## 2. Establishing working hypotheses

The job satisfaction level of a person depends on many factors, but in turn, it also depends on the results that the person has at work which in turn have a direct involvement in the financial results of the company. Also, a low level of job satisfaction automatically generates a greater desire to change jobs. This satisfaction level was severely affected by the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic which, in addition to the fact that it came with a series of work restrictions [social distancing, hygiene rules, working time, etc.] generated a more responsible behavior towards colleagues and also widely spread work from home, a form rarely used and accepted in the working field.

Work from home, in turn, has also generated another phenomenon such as: the pleasure of working from home given by: the freedom to combine office work with other domestic activities, the elimination of transportation expenses to work, gaining the time spent to travel to work and the safety of working from home, which depends on the conditions that each person has such as: having IT equipment, having a suitable place to work, lack of disruptive factors given by family members [Zhan, Popescu& Radu, 2020]. The COVID-19 pandemic also led to an increase in anxiety, a level of concern about the economic crisis, and a turmoil over job loss. Based on the analysis stated above, we outlined some hypotheses that we wanted to verify through this empirical research:

- H1 - leadership style [II, IM, IS, IC, CR, MEx and LF] has a significant positive impact on the level of job satisfaction;
- H2 - leadership style [II, IM, IS, IC, CR, MEx and LF] has a significant negative impact on the desire to change jobs;
- H3 - leadership style [II, IM, IS, IC, CR, ExM and LF] has a significant positive impact on the pleasure of working from home;
- H4 - leadership style [II, IM, IS, IC, CR, ExM and LF] has a significant positive impact on more responsible behavior towards colleagues;
- H5 - leadership style [II, IM, IS, IC, CR, ExM and LF] has a significant negative impact on the level of anxiety;
- H6 - leadership style [II, IM, IS, IC, CR, ExM and LF] has a significant negative impact on job loss turmoil;
- H7 - the pleasure of working from home has a significant positive impact on the level of job satisfaction;
- H8 - work safety at home has a significant positive impact on the level of job satisfaction;
- H9 - the level of anxiety has a significant negative impact on the level of job satisfaction;

- H10 - concern about the economic crisis has a significant negative impact on the level of job satisfaction;
- H11 - the level of job satisfaction has a significant negative impact on the desire to change jobs;
- H12 - the level of job satisfaction has a significant negative impact on the level of anxiety.

## 3. Research methodology

To carry out the empirical research, we adapted the MLQ questionnaire with 21 questions [table no. 1] to determine the management style of the direct manager of the employees from the studied SMEs. The questionnaire was completed by 941 employees from 67 SMEs. We wanted to avoid those differences that may arise between the manager's statement about his leadership style and the employee's perception. For the other variables measured [satisfaction, desire to change jobs, more responsible behavior towards colleagues, pleasure at work from home, safety at work from home, anxiety, anxiety about the crisis, worries about losing a job] we used the Likert scale.

Table 1.

**Question MLQ**

| Statements | Leadership style |
|---|---|
| It makes others feel good around him | Idealized influence or charisma [II] |
| Employees have full confidence in him | |
| People feel proud to be associated with him | |
| Express in a few words what should be done | Inspirational Motivation [IM] |
| Highlight the things that need to be done | |
| It helps people find meaning in their work | |
| It allows you to think of new solutions to old problems | Intellectual stimulation [AND] |
| It offers new ways of dealing with difficult issues | |
| It causes others to analyze ideas they have never thought of before | |
| It helps others grow | Individualized consideration [IC] |
| It shows how he thinks the problems should be solved | |
| Pay close attention to those who feel rejected | |
| Specify what to do if you want to be rewarded for your work | Contingent Reward [CR] |
| Offers rewards / recognition when employees meet their goals | |
| Draw attention to the benefits that can be obtained for the work done | |
| He is satisfied when his subordinates meet his standards | Exceptional management [ExM] |
| As long as things work, the manager is not looking to change anything | |
| It requires nothing more than what is absolutely essential | |
| Allows employees to work in their own style | laissez-faire [LF] |
| No matter what I do, it's good for my manager | |
| It sets out all the standards you need to meet in order to accomplish your tasks | |

*(Bass, B. M. & Avolio, B. J.-1992)*

**Research results and conclusions**

From the analysis of the empirical results [multiple linear regression, stepwise method] it was shown that out of the multitude of variables that we considered to influence the level of job satisfaction, only a few have a statistically representative influence.

Table 2.

**The influence of independent variables on the level of job satisfaction**

| Dependent variable: ***level of job satisfaction*** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Independent variables | B | t | p | R Square | IC |
| Idealized influence or charisma [II] | 0.304 | 6,865 | 0.001 | 0.230 | [0.071; 0.128] |
| Individualized consideration [IC] | 0.146 | 2,930 | 0.003 | 0.244 | [0.015; 0.078] |
| Safety at work from home | -0.117 | -4,054 | 0.001 | 0.258 | [-0.102; -0.044] |
| Concern about the economic crisis | 0.081 | 2,822 | 0.005 | 0.262 | [0.019; 0.109] |
| Anxiety level | -0.081 | -2,767 | 0.006 | 0.267 | [-0.102; -0.017] |
| Contingent Reward [CR] | 0.078 | 1983 | 0.048 | 0.270 | [0.000; 0.045] |

(*Source: SPSS data processing results*)

From the results the documents presented in table no. 2 we find that out of 11 variables that we considered to be able to influence the job satisfaction level, only 6 variables explain the variation of the dependent variable in a percentage of 27%.

Thus there are 3 management styles [II, IL and CR] that have a positive and significant impact on the level of job satisfaction. This means that the more pronounced the idealized influence styles, individualized consideration and contingency reward, the greater the level of job satisfaction. The other leadership styles, although they have a positive beta [ie have a positive influence] they do not have statistical representation because p> 0.05.

Thus, we can say that H1 is ***partially validated*** for leadership styles: II, IL and CR and is partially rejected for leadership styles: IM, IS, ExM, LF.

Hypothesis H7 according to which *the pleasure of working from home has a significant positive impact on job satisfaction level*; was ***invalidated*** because, although beta has a positive value, due to the fact that p = 0.532> 0.05 we have no statistical representation.

Hypothesis H8 that *the safety of working from home has a significant positive impact on the job satisfaction level*; was ***invalidated*** because beta has a negative value [-0.117], p = 0.001, which shows us that the safer the individual feels working at home, the lower the level of job satisfaction, which shows us that working from home is a negative influence on job satisfaction.

Hypothesis H9, according to which *the level of anxiety has a significant negative impact on the level of job satisfaction*, was ***validated*** because beta has a negative value [-0.081] and p = 0.006 <0.05, which shows that the more a person has a the higher the level of anxiety, the lower the job satisfaction level.

Hypothesis H10 according to which *the concern about the economic crisis has a significant negative impact on the job satisfaction level*, was ***validated*** because beta has a positive value [0.081], and p = 0.005 <0.05. This shows us that with each 1-point increase in concern about the crisis, the level of job satisfaction increases by 0.081.

Table 3.

**The influence of independent variables on the desire to change jobs**

| Dependent variable: ***desire to change jobs*** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Independent variables | B | t | p | R Square | IC |
| Idealized influence or charisma [II] | -0.115 | -6,627 | 0.001 | 0.108 | [-0.148; -0.081] |
| Level of job satisfaction | -0.326 | -6.183 | 0.001 | 0.142 | [-0.430; -0.223] |

*(Source: SPSS data processing results)*

The results presented in table no. 3 show that out of 8 variables that we considered to be able to influence the desire to change jobs, only 2 variables explain the variation of the dependent variable in a percentage of 14.2%. As can be seen in Table 3, the H2 hypothesis that *the leadership style [II, IM, IS, IC, CR, ExM and LF] has a significant negative impact on the desire to change jobs* has been ***partially validated***, because only for the idealized influence leadership style we have a negative beta coefficient [-0.115] and a significance level p = 0.001 <0.05.

These values show that with the 1point increase of the values promoted by this style, the desire to change jobs by 0.115 will decrease.

Hypothesis H11 according to which *the level of job satisfaction has a significant negative impact on the desire to change jobs*, was ***validated*** because the value of beta is [-0.326] and p = 0.001 <0.05. These results show that if the satisfaction level increases by one point, the desire to change the product by 0.326 points will decrease.

Table 4.

**The influence of leadership styles on the pleasure of working from home**

| The dependent variable: ***the pleasure of working from home*** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Independent variables | B | t | p | R Square | IC |
| Exceptional management [ExM] | 0.056 | 3,151 | 0.002 | 0.10 | [0.21; 0.091] |

*(Source: SPSS data processing results)*

The results presented in table no. 4 show that out of 7 variables that we considered that can influence the pleasure of working from home, only one variable explains the variation of the dependent variable in a percentage of 10%. H3 hypothesis that *the leadership style [II, IM, IS, IC, CR, ExM and LF] has a significant positive impact on the pleasure of*

*working from home* has been partially validated, as only the Management style exceptionally has a positive beta value [0.056], and p = 0.002 <0.05. These values show us that a 1point increase in the values of the leadership management style by exception increases by 0.056 points the pleasure of working from home.

Table 5.

**The influence of leadership styles on the development of more responsible behavior toward colleagues**

| Dependent variable: ***increasing responsibility towards colleagues*** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Independent variables | B | t | p | R Square | IC |
| Intellectual stimulation [IS] | 0.080 | 7,022 | 0.001 | 0.45 | [0.058; 0.103] |

*(Source: SPSS data processing results)*

From the results presented in table no. 5 we find that out of 7 variables that we considered to be able to influence the increase of responsibility towards colleagues, only one variable explains the variation of the dependent variable in a percentage of 45%.

Hypothesis H4 that *leadership style [II, IM, IS, IC, CR, ExM and LF] has a significant positive impact on more responsible peer behavior* is partially validated because only intellectual stimulation leadership style has a positive beta [0.08] and p = 0.001 <0.05. These values show that a 1-point increase in the values of the leadership style of intellectual stimulation, increases by 0.08 points the level of responsibility towards colleagues.

Table 6.

**Influence of leadership styles on job loss turmoil**

| Dependent variable: ***desire to change jobs*** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Independent variables | B | t | p | R Square | IC |
| Laissez-faire [LF] | -0.099 | -2,607 | 0.009 | 0.06 | [-0.082; -0.012] |
| Contingent Reward [CR] | 0.120 | 2,903 | 0.004 | 0.10 | [0.016; 0.084] |
| Exceptional Management [ExM] | -0.092 | -2,213 | 0.027 | 0.14 | [-0.093; -0.006] |

*(Source: SPSS data processing results)*

From the results presented in table no. 6 we find that out of 7 variables that we considered to be able to influence the worries regarding job loss, only 3 variables explain the variation of the dependent variable in a percentage of 14%.

Hypothesis H6 that the *leadership style [II, IM, IS, IC, CR, ExM and LF] has a significant negative impact on the job loss turmoil* has been ***partially validated***.

Thus, the Laissez-faire [LF] leadership style, with beta equal to -0.099 and p = 0.009 <0.05 has a statistically significant negative impact on job turmoil, ie if the level of this

management style is accentuated by 1 point, it will decrease with 0.099 points the level of turmoil regarding job loss.

The contingent reward [CR] leadership style, with beta equal to 0.120 and p = 0.004 <0.05 has a statistically significant positive impact on job turmoil, ie if the level of this management style is accentuated by 1 point, the level will increase by 0.120 points worries about job loss.

Leadership Management by Exception [MEx], with a beta equal to -0.092 and p = 0.027 <0.05 has a statistically significant negative impact on job turmoil, ie if the level of this management style is accentuated by 1 point, it will decrease by 0.092 points the level of turmoil regarding job loss.

**Final conclusions**

In conclusion, we can say that the values promoted by II, IC, and CR lead to an increase in job satisfaction of Romanian employees. Thus, a manager who makes others feel good around him, makes the employees have full confidence in him, and feel proud to be associated with his person will increase the degree of job satisfaction of the employee.

Also, the fact that he helps his subordinates develop shows how he believes problems should be solved and pays personal attention to those who feel rejected last but not least, the reward system offered for good work will increase employee job satisfaction level.

The desire of individuals to change their job is influenced by the level of job satisfaction, but also by the lack of values promoted by the idealized influence management style, namely: you would make them feel good around the manager, make them fully trust him and feel proud to be associated with him.

In the case of working from home, the values promoted by the leadership's exceptional management style can influence an increase in the satisfaction level, ie satisfaction if the goals are achieved, keeping things that work unchanged, respectively without requiring additional performance than that which is absolutely necessary.

When a crisis is expected [COVID-19], employees become aware of the danger, and some of them become more responsible for their work and their colleagues. Responsibility towards colleagues, in our case, is positively influenced by the values promoted by the leadership style of intellectual stimulation, ie emphasizing values such as: new solutions to old problems, new ways of approaching difficult problems, and analysis of ideas that have not been thought before.

Job loss is a permanent fear of employees. Even if, for some this fear is latent, it will increase with aging and with increasing personal responsibilities of the individual [family, installments, rents, etc.]. The values promoted by the Laissez-faire leadership style [*working in one's own style, no matter what it does, is good, knowing the standards needed to fulfill all tasks*] and Exceptional Management [*meeting the standards, as long as things work there are no changes, what is required is absolutely essential*] have a negative effect on the increase of fear.

At the same time, the Contingent Reward management style that promotes values as clear rewards for work done, and for the achievement of goals, benefits for work done, has a positive effect on the fear that the individual will lose his job. Although we can say that a reward system helps to increase performance, at the same time a high performance between individuals can lead to a fear that they may lose their job if their performance is exceeded by others.

As a final conclusion, we can say that the empirical results reinforce the importance of applying a more accentuated leadership style that brings the greatest benefits for a greater degree of employee satisfaction in order to increase the company's performance.

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