

Leadership Styles and Behaviors Nurturing Employee Well-Being: An Empirical Analysis

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Abstract

Employee well-being is crucial to workplace experience and performance. While this topic has been studied from various theoretical perspectives, the role of leaders appears to be crucial in shaping the workplace atmosphere. To understand which leadership styles and behaviors promote well-being, we interviewed 33 leaders covering the role of entrepreneurs or top managers across various firms. We applied the *Behavioral Event Interview* technique to collect detailed information about specific situations related to workplace well-being interventions. Findings show the use of a variety of leadership styles in favor of well-being (supportive and aggregating are the most prevalent ones) and 13 categories of behaviors that may be associated with specific behavioral competencies. Our findings suggest the need for targeted training programs designed to prepare leaders to address employee well-being, ultimately supporting both professional and personal wellness.

INTRODUCTION

Workplace well-being is crucial, influencing both employee health (Diener and Chan 2011) and professional performance (Bryson, Forth and Stokes 2017). As professional life affects many spheres of one's life, workplace well-being contributes significantly to overall well-being (Sitanshu and Pattanayak 2023). Literature recognizes leaders' fundamental role in shaping the team climate (Boyatzis and McKee 2005; Edmondson *et al.* 2016; Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee 2004; Horstmann 2018; Jiménez, Winkler and Dunkl 2017). Consequently, leaders and leadership styles play a determinant role in creating health-promoting workplaces (Jiménez, Winkler and Bregenzer 2017; Montano, Schleu and Hüffmeier 2023).

More broadly, the notion of healthy leadership has been defined through various models, but still requires concrete application to achieve a real and significant positive impact on employees (Rudolph, Murphy and Zacher 2020). It is therefore legitimate to understand which factors define how individuals feel at work and how leaders may play a significant role in employees' well-being through the styles they adopt. The concept of well-being is complex and has been measured from different approaches, highlighting its complexity (Azila-Gbetteo *et al.* 2024). In particular, well-being has been studied from multiple perspectives, representing a complex concept associated with various dimensions, e.g. job satisfaction (Bryson, Forth and Stokes 2017; Voitenko *et al.* 2024), job-related emotions (Sudha, Shahnawaz and Farhat 2016), work engagement (Adams, Meyers and Sekaja 2020). Research examining well-being as a dimensional construct typically relies on scales and correlational studies. However, these approaches cannot provide a comprehensive view of leader behaviors generating well-being and leadership profiles that contribute to organizational wellness.

Although well-being is a concept that impacts various spheres of an organization, our focus aims at bringing new knowledge with respect to how well-being in the company is conceived, by analyzing how leaders foster well-being in the company. Whereas extant literature primarily focuses on how employees perceive their well-being in the company, our research gives a new perspective based on how those at the top of a company think and act to make employees feel good, and examines well-being from a process perspective, investigating the behaviors that leaders adopt to promote well-being within their specific organizational contexts. Concretely, we focus on real job situations reported by leaders to identify how they conceptualize and implement well-being initiatives. This approach aims to explore both leadership styles and specific actions that foster a healthy workplace atmosphere.

In the next sections of this paper, we present the theoretical framework and the related research questions, followed by the methodological framework adopted for data collection and the findings. The discussion advances concrete reflections on the approach of leaders in favor of workplace well-being, highlighting prevalent leadership styles and actions promoting healthy professional attitudes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Leaders have a crucial impact on employee well-being (Horstmann 2018; Jiménez, Winkler and Dunkl 2017). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health not only as the absence of disease or infirmity, but also as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being (World Health Organization 2006). Accordingly, workplace well-being encompasses various dimensions including physical, mental, social and emotional spheres.

Rudolph *et al.* (2020) introduced the concept of 'healthy leadership' to broadly describe the approaches that leaders adopt to promote overall well-being in professional contexts. Both values and behaviors of leaders are relevant when exploring how to lead with healthy intentions. In this line, Bregenzer, Milfelner and Šarotar Žižek (2020) argue that leadership behavior – as the way of communication with the employees – reflects the leader's mindset. On their side, Shelton *et al.* (2021) demonstrated that the leaders' process skills (i.e. management of time) are significant to maintain

positive behaviors even in challenging moments for the organization. Therefore, understanding how leaders conceptualize well-being within their organizations and how this shapes their interactions with their employees becomes crucial. Promoting workers' well-being contributes to organizational performance (Bryson, Forth and Stokes 2017). Prioritizing employees' well-being may contribute to rise the human potential and to enhance financial benefits, generating up to 11.7 trillion in global economic value (World Economic Forum 2025).

In line with these purposes, approaches like the Organizational Support Theory indicates that employees evaluate how the firm considers their efforts and well-being, and have expectations regarding their needs (Vermeulen and Scheepers 2020). Yet, the perceived organizational support impacts, for example, the way employees live effort-reward fairness and affective commitment (Dinç 2015). Other approaches have experienced a significant growth, like Positive Psychology in the Workplace – englobing the perspective of Positive Organizational Behavior and Positive Organizational Scholarship, highlighting the current need for organizations to value not only the performance and the financial outcomes, but also how employees live the workplace and their job (Mills, Fleck and Kozikowski 2013). In this regard, Gilbreath and Benson (2004) demonstrated that employees who have a better psychological health are the ones with supervisors who are perceived adopting mainly positive behaviors, and rarely negative behaviors. Therefore, it has been measured that the positivity of the leaders is associated with the positivity of employees (Avey, Avolio and Luthans 2011).

Literature widely recognizes that healthy work climates, characterized by high performance and where people feel good, are associated with emotionally intelligent leaders, who can effectively identify, manage and use both their own and others' emotions (Boyatzis and McKee 2005; Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee 2004; Mikolajczak and Bausseron 2013). Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2004) examined leadership styles developed by individuals with responsibility roles, focusing on characteristics associated with emotional intelligence. The authors identified distinct profiles based on leader-employee dynamics. For instance, coaching leaders establish positive relationships based on agreement and trust, supporting employees in the process of goal attainment. Differently, federator leaders focus more on the emotions of their employees than on the attainment of professional goals. Additional leadership styles highlight the diverse approaches leader can adopt while interacting with their employees (Boyatzis and McKee 2005).

More broadly, Bregenzer, Milfelner and Šarotar Žižek (2020) showed that leaders who demonstrate self-listening positively impact employee well-being and that an improved workplace health is linked to an increased attendance and job satisfaction. Similarly, Reb *et al.* (2014) found that leaders who have awareness on the present circumstances and non-judgmental attitudes correlate negatively with employee emotional exhaustion and positively with the employee work-life balance and performance. The quality of the relationships between leaders and employees and the leadership style significantly influence affective well-being, including the level of stress (Skakon *et al.* 2010).

Furthermore, the role of the leader is recognized to be determinant on the climate of safety, and consequently of learning within working groups (Edmondson *et al.* 2016). Indeed, research on psychological safety in the work environment clearly highlights the importance of creating environments where employees feel secure, unafraid of others' reactions, and comfortable in their roles (Edmondson 1999; Edmondson and Bransby 2023; Edmondson and Lei 2014). A climate of psychological well-being and happiness is significantly associated with better performance (Wright and Cropanzano 2000), underscoring the importance of examining the approach of leaders and their impact on business climate.

The atmosphere in the organization can also be determined by the gender dynamics. In particular, gender-diverse boards teams are recognized to be more creative, innovative and more effective in problem solving (Ellemers 2014; Page 2017) thanks to a variety of perspectives generated by the fact that feminine leadership may present complementary traits to masculine leadership (Cook, Ingersoll

and Glass 2019; Glass and Cook 2018; Phillips and Grandy 2018). So, the presence of women within leadership would thus be a valuable prerequisite for contributing to an effective beneficial dynamic in workplaces.

Based on the set of considerations presented hereinabove, we focus on the characteristics of leaders, specifically how they conceptualize and promote organizational well-being from a process-oriented, behavior-based perspective. The literature presents several studies measuring employee well-being using specific and validated instruments, sometimes correlating these measures with leadership styles. However, these studies primarily focus on the various dimensions of well-being, and on the specific items used for the measurements, while neglecting to examine the concrete behaviors adopted in implementing well-being initiatives. For instance, some research assesses emotional reactions to the job (Sudha, Shahnawaz and Farhat 2016), or satisfaction at work – based on parameters such as salary, working conditions, and additional benefits (Voitenko *et al.* 2024). Well-being has also been measured as a composite construct incorporating specific measures of burnout, work engagement and self-efficacy (Adams, Meyers and Sekaja 2020), or as a combination of satisfactions factors including pay, sense of achievement, training, skills development, job security, and work content (Bryson, Forth and Stokes 2017). Other researchers expand the well-being construct to include not only of job satisfaction, engagement and stress, but also physical dimensions such as sleep quality (Sitanshu and Pattanayak 2023).

Conceptualizing well-being as a multidimensional construct implies viewing it as a pre-constructed terminology which may be measured. However, using measurement scales where individuals are asked to assess their own well-being introduces various biases, including social desirability (Diener *et al.* 1991). Such biases can be mitigated by shifting from a ‘well-being assessment perspective’ to one where well-being is conceived as a processual perspective resulting from leaders' behaviors.

Other studies investigated the link between leadership styles and employee well-being by asking employees to rate their leader on a Likert scale based on predefined dimensions of styles, through employees' personal observations and estimates of their leader (Onesti 2023; Pathak and Jha 2024; Pulido-Martos *et al.* 2023; Yap and Badri 2021). Consequently, these studies present the limitation of assessing leadership styles from the employees' point of view or determining it from how the leaders themselves describe their approach. Other studies, as reported in the meta-analysis of Inceoglu *et al.* (2018), examined the impact that leadership behaviors have on employees' well-being. The focus is thus brought to the link between the two concepts and not on how leaders act for organizational well-being, thus analyzing the link between leadership styles and employees' estimation of well-being.

Therefore, differently from previous studies, our research wants to address the current gap in the literature regarding how leaders manifest pro-wellness approaches and behaviors. Specifically, we examine leadership styles to understand the behaviors that are expressed in cases where leaders act to support organization well-being. Then, we explore the concrete actions implemented to foster employee well-being. Our research questions are:

Which leadership styles are adopted by leaders while promoting employee well-being initiatives?
What specific actions do leaders take to support organizational well-being?

The contribution of this study lies in adopting a process approach that considers well-being from the change agent's perspective during well-being initiative implementation, rather than from pre-established dimensions based on recipients' view. This study thus moves beyond well-being measurement to explore how leaders respond to workplace circumstances to protect and foster a positive organizational environment. Specifically, we identify the leadership styles adopted by leaders to interact with their employees and the actions they implemented related to professional well-being. The goal is to bring new knowledge enriching our understanding of leadership and its role in supporting organizational development through healthy work climates via leaders' behavior. Findings

may encourage training institutions to implement programs developing leadership profiles that are effective in promoting organizational well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Our sample consists of 33 leaders in top organizational positions, including 17 entrepreneurs and 16 top managers. The age ranges from 36 to 76 years ($M = 52.0$; $SD = 9.37$), with role seniority ranging from 2 to 34 years ($M = 11.73$; $SD = 9.77$).

The sample selection followed a non-random approach, as it results from a selection of companies led by women and with successful business performance based on multiple financial indicators: ROA (return on assets), ROE (return on equity), ROI (return on investments), ROS (return on sales). The selected leaders work in 31 different professional sectors in Northeast Italy (Veneto Region), as classified by the ATECO system – the standard classification of economic sectors in the Italian market.

Context

The focus on the Veneto Region is justified by its distinctive entrepreneurial culture and economic significance. The region demonstrates higher per capita wealth compared to the national average (Regione del Veneto 2023) and ranks as Italy's third largest region in terms of wealth production, measured by Gross Domestic Product (Regione del Veneto 2024).

Our research is part of a wider project to study the characteristics of effective leadership. The purpose of the project is to support successful practices and design training programs to contribute to positive feminine leadership practices. More specifically, the research was conducted within the framework of a gender equality study, our sample is exclusively composed by women. Therefore, our analyses focus on the data that emerged with specific considerations about leadership behaviors and actions, rather than gender-specific characteristics.

Method

Data collection was conducted through interviews where respondents described how they behaved in implementing well-being initiatives in their organizations. Our intent was to extract descriptions of concrete situations from which to identify leadership styles and behaviors. We used the *Behavioral Event Interview* technique, which enables the collection of detailed information about the context and the actual behavioral patterns adopted in specific situations, avoiding general opinions and beliefs. This technique is particularly effective in gathering accurate examples of real situations that reveal the interviewee's role and contribution (Spencer and Spencer 1993). Following this approach, we considered the narratives as representation of valuable and meaningful human experiences (Moen 2006).

For practical reasons, 32 interviews were conducted via video call, with one respondent opting for a face-to-face interview. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent, transcribed and imported into *NVivo14* software for analysis. To ensure anonymization, we designated entrepreneurs as "E" and managers as "M", with each participant assigned to a unique numerical identifier that let us trace the origin of the narratives.

To address our first research question, we coded the transcribed narratives using a dictionary that allowed us to distinguish the various leadership styles. This categorization process was based on the dimensions clearly defined in the literature by Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002) in their work on emotional intelligence in leadership, which examines the impact of emotional competencies in the workplace dynamics. We chose Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee's model since well-being involves various spheres of experience – not just the professional one – (Mills, Fleck and Kozikowski 2013),

and it is based on the conception that leaders define the emotional standard of the professional team (Goleman 2013). Emotional intelligence is fundament for a constructive and powerful environment (Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee 2004). Therefore, emotionally intelligent leaders contribute to a positive climate and greater productivity in the company (Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee 2002). Moreover, the choice of such a categorization of leadership styles is made in accordance with the research approaches we have considered for the larger project in which this research specifically fits. Concretely, we considered six leadership styles, according to the following definitions (Table 1):

Table 1

Leadership Styles

Supportive	Discusses continuously with the team, listen to all the members, guide them, and support their alignment with their personal aspirations with the aim of developing them.
Aggregating	Enhances harmony within the group and values individuals, considering their personal positionings, with the aim of improving the climate of the team.
Inspirational	Provides a clear vision and effectively communicates it to others. Defines goals, objectives, and ideals, creating enthusiasm and motivating the team.
Democratic	Encourages team members' active participation, involving each member in decision-making and valuing each input.
Authoritarian	Demands immediate compliance and seriously controls the team actions, ensuring that tasks are executed as required.
Demanding	Result-oriented and fixing challenging goals, demanding high performance from the team.

For our second research question, we analyzed the narratives to identify concrete actions that leaders described related to their impact on employee well-being. We then developed specific thematic categories as the foundation for descriptive analysis. We adopted an abductive perspective that uses the theoretical framework of well-being and leadership as the basis for exploring leaders' actions. Abduction is intended to understand reality and offer elements that can be further explored empirically with the emerged hypothesis (Moscoso 2013). It is a process where theory and analysis co-evolve, through to the progression of the analysis and the subsequent research considerations (Anadón and Guillemette 2007).

In addressing this second question, we developed thematic categories inductively from the narratives without having a pre-existing code dictionary. For each identified code, we developed a theme definition to ensure consistent attribution of the narrative extracts to specific actions. Following Paillé and Mucchielli (2012), we treated each category – or code – as a phenomenon with distinct characteristics, representing a singular dynamic of reality differentiated from other phenomena. Given our research objective of identifying concrete actions that leaders took to implement well-being initiatives, we adopted an exploratory approach where the narratives themselves constituted our primary data source (Rondeau and Paillé 2016).

After extracting and categorizing the actions, we associated them with specific behavioral competencies. This supplementary step of our analysis helped identify skills that leaders can leverage to enhance organizational well-being. We based this attribution on a specific dictionary of behavioral competencies that has been refined through research that conceptualizes a competency as a set of behaviors driven by specific intentions (Boyatzis, 2008).

FINDINGS

First, from the specific situations that were described during the interviews, we identified parts of the narratives that can be associated with the leadership styles. The presence of detected profile is

illustrated in Figure 1. Our findings suggest that the most prevalent leadership styles that respondents manifest in well-being situations are supportive and aggregating.

The supportive style is characterized by encouragement, involvement in teamwork and commitment to enabling employee performance and development. Leaders demonstrating this style show explicit intention to support employees in their work continuity and achievement of professional goals. Some examples follow:

We have a couple working in the firm that has no help from the families of origin, which is essential today. They have a small child. The daycare closes at 03:30 and puts him on the street, a shameful thing; and so, in this case we intervened with the cost of the babysitter who picks up the child and brings him home at least for that hour, hour and a half, to facilitate the mother to finish her tasks and responsibilities within the company. E6

Before presenting the budget to the partners, we share it with the employees in a simple way because obviously not everyone is accustomed to talking about it. In short, we explain how the organization is doing, so that then when it is presented to the partners, they are all present and have already seen it. And so, they are also aware of what is being shared, and this is also a very important act. M17

Synergy is not that you say “yes, we are teamed up” you have to create it, build it and so on. So, we're putting them through courses to help them create more synergy, do projects together. Projects that we will then reuse within the company. E22

The aggregating leadership style, the second most prevalent in our findings, focuses on creating a united team with effective collaboration between leader and employees, with a particular attention to organizational climate. This style emphasizes mutual respect and open dialogue between parties to foster team cohesion. Some examples follow:

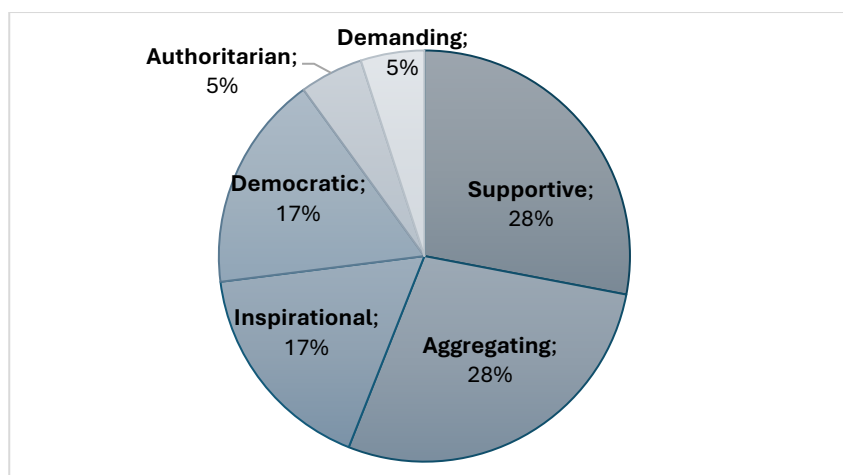
You cannot be alone in leadership excluding the employees. You also must stop and confront each other about where you want to go together, what you can do to get there. Not for everything, but for the things a little bit more macro. On a couple of things that are the new things we decide together, we marry them together or we leave them there, that's it. M9

I have to feel that they are part of the team; so, I have to trust them and I have to feel their trust. M3

Since we work with the problems that our clients give us, at least among us we have to be good. We laugh a lot, we do yoga and do 1'000 things together; and I'll study anything and everything else [to be well within the group]. E10

Figure 1

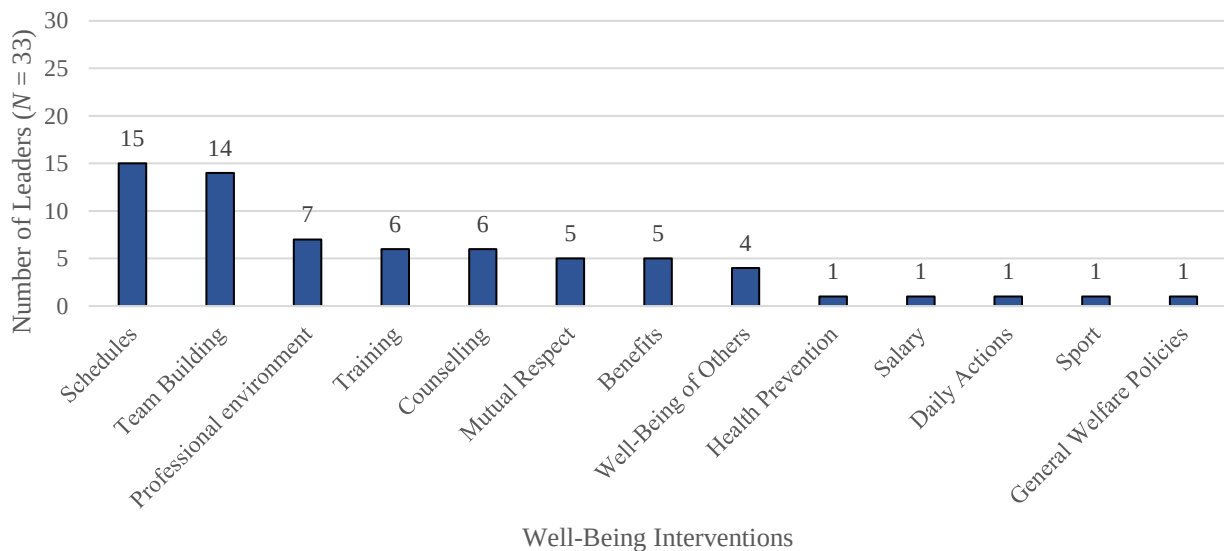
Leadership Styles Identified in Leaders' Well-Being Initiatives (N = 33)



Second, our analysis of the narratives identified specific actions that leaders implemented to promote employees' well-being. Some leaders have reported more than one action. These actions comprise interventions and policies that respondents consider to be associated with employee well-being. The analysis yielded 13 distinct categories of actions, as illustrated in Figure 2. Among these, schedule flexibility and team building initiatives emerged as the most prevalent approaches that leaders employed to support workplace well-being.

Figure 2

Actions that Leaders Associate with Enhancing Employee Well-Being



In Table 2 we report the actions, their definition, one example taken from the narratives, and the related behavioral competencies.

Table 2

Actions Deployed for Supporting Well-Being and Related Behavioral Competencies

Category of action	Definition	Examples	Related Behavioral Competencies
Schedules	Interventions made to make working hours flexible both in terms of time and location. Also includes actions made to defend flexible work schedules in case of unexpected events that happened to employees.	<i>I implement a lot of flexibility, in the sense of company rules. If a person asks me for two days of smartworking because something happens, I grant it without any problem [...] I go in first person to approve, to make the requests directly to the HR department to make sure that work life and private life are conciliated. M13</i>	Service orientation
Team Building	Actions to unify the team, to create positive group dynamics, even proposing activities outside the work context.	<i>I do all the team integration part, team building, in which I also give feedback to let understand what happened [...] thanks to the team building they were able to bring together different perspectives. M14</i>	Team work

Professional Environment	Interventions to make workspaces comfortable.	<i>In our centers we have a kitchen, many times even living room with a couch [...] I believe that the better an employee is the better he works. E16</i>	Service orientation
Training	Training paths that are considered to contribute to employee well-being.	<i>For the well-being, we also do training activities. For example, we did the enterprise gymnasium [...] We convened a national volleyball team champion together with the national volleyball team psychologist and through the game of volleyball they instilled in them what it means to be together, to work in a network, to support each other, to help each other. E20</i>	Developing others
Listening	Listening attitude associated with well-being.	<i>I listened to a lot of employees who told me a lot of things. M12</i>	Empathy
Mutual Respect	Transparency and mutual trust, that are considered fundamental elements of well-being in the company.	<i>I am convinced that a person, if he is happy and if he is serene in his work, can give much more than he can give in different situations. Therefore, I always try to treat the people who work with me very well, to make them actively participate in what we do. M2</i>	Integrity
Benefits	Rewards that are seen as a sign of gratification for the work done, considered a recompense that sustains the well-being of employee.	<i>We give the opportunity for people to be able to receive the reward, or rather than allocate it to a pension fund, or go to recover a number of expenses related to education, transportation, schoolbooks, college. M6</i>	Initiative
Well-Being of others	Actions and care to enable others to be well.	<i>I've had people who were sick, who were sending e-mails and I had to tell them: "You're sick. Can you go rest please?" E23</i>	Empathy
Health Prevention	Actions for employee health.	<i>For the Women's Day, we give mimosas and we offer blood tests to all our women, if they want. For a month or so, we do different dates [...] Then every year we do a checkup. We did one a year for all employees, with a health camper. M4</i>	Initiative
Salary	Attention brought to salary as an allowance that maintains the well-being of employees.	<i>We invest a lot in our employees, so in their salaries. E24</i>	Service orientation
Daily Actions	Daily gestures and services considered part of well-being in the company.	<i>For welfare, in my opinion, you do a lot of things that can also be trivial, like offering free coffee every day, having the cookie ready for everyone, which eventually when you get used to it is normal, but it is not normal. M7</i>	Service orientation
Sport	Sport activities offered in the company.	<i>We do 2 hours of gyrokinesis class inside our meeting rooms that are enlarged, the tables, the stools and the mats are taken out. E12</i>	Initiative
General Welfare Policies	Introduction of welfare policies.	<i>We introduced the welfare system for many employees. E14</i>	Initiative

DISCUSSION

Our study aimed to explore leadership styles and actions that enhance employee well-being, adopting a process-oriented, behavior-based approach. Leadership styles and behaviors were extracted from the leaders' narratives describing concrete situations where they effectively influenced employee well-being initiatives. The diversity of leaders' experiences generated different perspectives and approaches to well-being implementation.

Leadership styles in promoting well-being

Regarding our first research question – examining leadership styles that leaders apply to support the employee well-being – our findings indicate the predominance of supportive and aggregating styles in well-being situations. The supportive style reflects leaders' willingness to respond to the needs to perform the job effectively and to grow, reconciling professional life with the upcoming commitments of private life. This finding aligns with research that highlights that social support from the leader is a relevant variable moderating the relationship between the employee well-being and the satisfaction of psychological needs (Voitenko *et al.* 2024). The support of the leader is crucial to let employees feel good in the workplace, highlighting the importance of helping leaders in promoting sustainable workplaces and employee health (Jiménez, Winkler and Bregenzer 2017).

The supportive style draws upon empathy, which is related to the awareness of the self and others' emotional states (Goleman 1995). In leadership contexts, this competence is related to social intelligence (Boyatzis 2018), and allows to understand employees' needs to stay in the company, appreciating the work and being able to do it to the best of their ability. Training programs focusing on needs assessment and feedback on workplace conditions could prove valuable in fostering supportive and well-being-conscious organizational approaches.

Our findings also highlight the relevance of an aggregating style in well-being situations. Research confirms that a positive climate in which one feels part of the group is beneficial to well-being as well as to performance (Edmondson and Bransby 2023; Eriksson, Axelsson and Axelsson 2011). In fact, aggregative behaviors tend to enhance individual well-being and work performance, potentially generating positive returns to the firm (Bryson, Forth and Stokes 2017). Therefore, developing leaders' aggregative style may benefit individual and team well-being, while improving workplace atmosphere and performance.

Leaders play a crucial role in ensuring that the teamwork is functional and that members interact effectively, with the necessary resources and training (Roper and Phillips 2007). Moreover, a leader who is able to build positive relationship enhance trusting interactions and long-term well-being of the employees (Zbierowski 2019). Research also demonstrates that positive workplace relationships are associated with low stress (Skakon *et al.* 2010). Being able to create a spirit of union is therefore beneficial to the well-being of each employee as well as of the company.

Our findings suggest the importance of training leaders to understand their potential impact on employee well-being through their leadership style (Sitanshu and Pattanayak 2023). Research also encourages training interventions that increase health awareness (Horstmann 2018). This approach aligns with mindful leadership, that is not only conscious presence, but also a sense of open heart and mind, which does not judge, but welcomes the dynamics of reality and develops itself consequently, in the awareness of the circumstances (Kabat-Zinn 2003; Reb, Narayanan and Chaturvedi 2014). Since awareness of one's values and ways of acting is a fundamental element of competent leaders, findings seem to encourage leaders' self-awareness regarding their identity and attitudinal tendencies.

So, the findings of our study reflect also the purposes of positive leadership, and in particular the importance of accompanying leaders in developing their emotional competencies, like the capacity of regulating their emotions, which results a crucial ability for well-being (Shelton, Hein and Phipps 2021). Fostering the development of leadership styles that promote positive relationships in the

workplace – as it is the case of the supportive and aggregating styles that we identified in our study – is a fundamental element for improving behaviors that are perceived positively and that contribute to employees' well-being and better engagement. In fact, the link between affective commitment and effort-reward fairness is moderated by perceived organizational support (Dinç 2015). Therefore, “the perceived organizational support is also more likely when employees develop a sense of trust that enables them to feel supported, regardless of what tangible forms of support are available from the organization” (Mills, Fleck and Kozikowski 2013, p.10).

So, in identifying leadership styles that leaders show in promoting employees' well-being, our study suggests specific profiles that would be useful to encourage and develop to support positive attitudes towards healthy workplaces. Concretely, training could be implemented to let leaders identify their leadership profile through specific questionnaires (Bruni *et al.* 2018) – and then accompany them in reflective work-individual and group-to understand how they could develop more supportive and aggregative leadership. The exchange among leaders is intended to help open other possible leadership profiles and exchanges of effective practices.

Leadership Actions for Well-Being

Addressing our second research question – regarding well-being associated actions – work schedule flexibility emerged as the predominant theme. Schedule management appears to be a crucial factor that leaders associate with professional well-being. The related behavioral competency we identified involves the ability to understand others' needs, which represents the skill to be responsible for teamwork and to guarantee employee wellness.

Leaders emphasized schedule flexibility, including options for part-time work, remote working arrangements, and the importance of protecting this flexibility. Our findings suggest that leaders can contribute to time-management policies that promote employee autonomy when work conditions permit such flexibility. These findings highlight the growing importance of work-life integration in contemporary society. This aligns with research emphasizing the importance of preserving recovery time and personal life (Wepfer *et al.* 2018) and rethinking policies to support work-life balance (Bhopal 2020; Olsson *et al.* 2023; Ventura *et al.* 2021). Moreover, since the process skills – like the time utilization – are associated with positive leadership behaviors (Shelton, Hein and Phipps 2021), it would be interesting to study if the positive effects of such competences orientate leaders in recognizing the importance of supporting efficient schedule organization.

Schedule flexibility proves important both for family management and reconciling professional commitments with personal interests. Well-being appears associated with enabling employees to manage work time more independently, ensuring that professional obligations don't impede personal development. These objectives align with leaders' ability to recognize employees' priority needs and promote healthy conditions addressing fundamental requirements (Jiménez, Winkler and Dunkl 2017). In fact, such a carefully attitude foster a climate of commitment and performance, as well as satisfaction with working conditions (Eriksson, Axelsson and Axelsson 2011).

Given our feminine respondent sample, schedule and location flexibility emerged as particularly significant. For instance, during motherhood, women require organizational flexibility to manage biological imperatives such as breastfeeding (Ventura *et al.* 2021; Whittington 2019). In particular, women are concerned by the fact that the role of caregiver is still attributed to the mother (Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Whittington 2019), either by instinct or tradition. In order for a mother to continue on her own career path, it is therefore essential to adopt policies that enable her to manage her different roles (Due Billing 2011; Torres *et al.* 2024).

Then, the second group of actions to support well-being concerns team building. Leaders described interventions fostering group cohesion, promoting positive interactions among otherwise isolated employees, and encouraging expression of hidden personality traits—contributing to authentic self-

expression and group comfort. The associated behavioral competency is teamwork: the ability to create, maintain, and leverage team relationships for collaborative goal achievement.

Team building activities are reported to be opportunities to establish new group dynamics and create cohesion that would not be possible through activities purely associated with the profession. Engaging in different activities outside the organizational context appears to facilitate beneficial interactions, foster group spirit, and develop soft skills. Research confirms that activities focused on teambuilding competencies improve team outcomes, specially concerning the affective sphere (Klein *et al.* 2009). It is demonstrated that the quality of the organizational networks shapes the feeling of individuals at work (Totterdell *et al.* 2004). In fact, professional groups are social entities where the well-being of a subject interacts with the one of the colleagues, so that the aggregation and co-influences determine the global dynamic, performance and well-being (Bryson, Forth and Stokes 2017). Team building may therefore play a significant role in the quality of the employees' interactions, since the fact of relying upon each other in the workplace makes relationships a crucial element of professional experience (Mills, Fleck and Kozikowski 2013).

Our study highlights the importance of considering that employees' behavioral competencies are useful for workplace contexts and can be developed beyond professional tasks. This perspective opens the way for the construction of positive dynamics through getting to know each other in a non-work-focused context. Research confirms that training behavioral skills and group cohesion in other contexts than the workplace has positive impacts on the professional global skills profile, and consequently on team effectiveness (Molek-Winiarska and Kawka 2024; Stoller *et al.* 2004). Thus, proposing to workers activities which aim the well-being including benefits in terms of community and sense of belonging within a larger system – as it is for example the case activities in the forest (Abookire, Ayala and Shadick 2024) – are associated with positive effects on physical, mental and emotional spheres. The further reflection is how to foster such moments of teambuilding, which are probably not suitable for everyone and require time as well as organizational and economic investment. Consequently, the question remains open regarding the frequency of such activities, and the actual impact depending on the groups and activities.

Training programs for professionals could then support the ability to reflect on different strategies to support well-being, for example by training how to plainly and efficiently manage flexible schedules and team building activities. It is therefore demonstrated that specific programs for leaders may improve the professional environment and increase positive interaction between leaders and employees, with consequent benefits also in biochemical and emotional parameters (Theorell *et al.* 2001).

These considerations also reflect research on positive leadership, which highlights the importance of accompanying leaders to develop their work behaviors as ability to face positively different situations and limit the impact of stress (Shelton, Hein and Phipps 2021). Moreover, supporting leaders in the development of positive behaviors constitute a potential element for broader benefit, both for leaders themselves and employees (Gilbreath and Benson 2004), but also for all people that will benefit of the organizational performance. Our study therefore highlights the importance of encouraging leaders to develop their skills to have a potential impact on organizational well-being. Identifying actions that are recognized to be important for well-being in the company is the first step to be able to plan targeted development programs, and to improve the capability of leaders to promote well-being in the company.

Therefore, sharing stories may be a useful strategy to show obstacles but also benefits experienced in specific leadership path (Torres *et al.* 2024). Thanks to the participants' testimonials, this research has provided powerful material to use as source of positive and successful practices of leadership that take care of the organizational well-being, that may inspire leaders and contribute to fostering policies on how to lead employees in a healthy climate. Such testimonies can be a stimulus for implementing

effective well-being actions in other organizations as well. Such interventions can later be studied to understand their actual impact, for example through case studies.

Concretely, this research provides insights for training activities for leaders, on the one hand to let them to increase awareness of their actions and, on the other hand, to allow them to broaden consciousness with respect to the range of possible ways of action they could implement to further contribute to well-being within their firms. The use of specific tools (Bonesso, Cortellazzo and Gerli 2022) may enable participants to identify their profile of competencies developed during their career. The awareness on their actions and respective competencies, as well as to the creation of a plan for the development of specific competencies, can prove to be significant for the development of leadership behaviors oriented towards well-being.

Finally, our findings contribute to highlight the presence of a variety of competences developed by women. This may help to counterbalance the presence of stereotypes toward women which are anchored in cultures, devaluating the power of the potential feminine competencies (Eagly and Carli 2003; Ellemers 2014). Women are often considered less competent than men (Eagly and Carli 2003; Hogue and Lord 2007; Shinbrot *et al.* 2019) and there is a tendency to prefer men in leadership roles than women (Stoker, Van der Velde and Lammers 2012). Such a tendency to underestimate women leaders risks to reduce their self-confidence, doubting on their effective competencies to reach the top (Taylor *et al.* 2016). Considering such difficulties, it is not surprising to constate that feminine leadership is still underrepresented (Lyness and Thompson 2000; Sheppard 2018). In fact, women still face barriers to their professional advancement. Literature speak about “glass ceiling” to illustrate the invisible obstacles that women have to face to advance in their leadership career (Johns 2013). Consequently, it is useful to show the added value that women can bring into the labor market and support their leadership path. Our research brings a considerable part of knowledge in this regard.

In future studies it would be useful to investigate the specificity of leadership styles and actions performed by women at the top, helping to identify the peculiarities of behavioral competencies that are mostly developed in feminine leadership. Parallels can then be done with masculine leadership. Further analysis could delve into specificity associated with the assumed leadership role (entrepreneur or manager) or other elements potentially characteristic of a given leadership, such as years as a leader or the cultural context.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated leadership styles and behaviors related to well-being initiatives. Using *Behavioral Event Interview* technique (Spencer and Spencer 1993), we collected detailed narratives of concrete professional situations, which consist in extracting specific information regarding leadership well-being practices (Rudolph, Murphy and Zacher 2020). Unlike research focusing on the different dimensions of well-being, in this study we explored the concrete actions that leaders take to enhance employee well-being.

Our findings revealed supportive and aggregating styles as prevalent in the implementation of well-being initiatives. These findings emphasize the importance of a greater awareness of one's leadership profile in order to enhance healthy and effective approaches in relation to employees. We then identified 13 categories of actions that leaders perform in well-being initiatives: actions to support flexibility in working time and actions to support team building are the most prevalent ones. Our study therefore highlights the necessity to rethink the traditional approaches to conceive schedules and time to foster the group dynamic. Overall, our analysis suggests to design training programs aimed at supporting the development of pro-well-being actions and of the related behavioral competencies.

Moreover, for project reason, the samples is totally feminine, so that our findings may contribute to bring new knowledge about an emerging phenomenon such as feminine leadership (Hobbins, Kristiansen and Carlström 2023), which still face to gender-based challenges (Johns 2013; Lyness and Thompson 2000; Sheppard 2018). The considerations that emerged from our study bring evidence regarding the value that women can bring to a firm and particularly by occupying apical roles. It is therefore relevant to emphasize the importance of taking attention in the leadership profiles that both women and men can develop to foster well-being in the company. Our process-oriented approach provides a way to highlight concrete behaviors of different leaders, thus offering a practical overview that may result in the development of guidelines regarding practices to apply for effective leadership.

Limitations and perspectives for future research

Our study focused on the actions that leaders take to support well-being within their companies. However, well-being remains a broad term that can have different nuances in its definition. Thus, it should be considered that the findings are not generalizable depending on the definition one chooses to study well-being in the company (Rudolph, Murphy and Zacher 2020). Moreover, our study involves a limited number of narratives, and the findings deserve to be enriched with further research.

Then, since our study has been conducted in a project on gender equality, our sample is composed only by women. On one side, it is pertinent to study feminine leadership since such a topic needs to be explored because women are underrepresented in top position roles (Baptiste *et al.* 2024; Oakley 2000; Sheppard 2018). On the other side, our research does not include a masculine control group, so cannot focus on women leaders' specificities. Thus, our findings offer general insights on leadership styles and attitudes, with the limit to having a feminine sample.

Finally, our study considered the well-being that leaders consider with respect to the work group. Other types of well-being, such as personal well-being as a leader, would merit further study in order to gain a broader view of how leadership is associated with ways of being and acting in favor of the health of those who lead the company. In conclusion, future research could explore the behaviors that leaders adopt to support their own well-being and contribute to sharing such strategies for increasing self-care and private life in parallel with a successful career path.

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