The authentic leader in times of crises: a portrait of the effects of authentic leadership on the well-being of its employees during the COVID-19 pandemic

O líder autêntico em tempos de crise: um retrato dos efeitos da liderança autêntica no bem-estar de seus funcionários durante a pandemia de COVID-19

El líder auténtico en tiempos de crisis: un retrato de los efectos de la liderazgo auténtico en el bienestar de sus empleados durante la pandemia de COVID-19

DOI: 10.55905/ijsmtv10n2-045

Originals received: 02/27/2024
Acceptance for publication: 03/26/2024

Derson da Silva Lopes Junior
Doutor em Administração
Institution: Faculdade Adventista da Amazônia (FAAMA), Aspectum Business School (ABS)
Address: Avenida Roque Petroni Júnior, 1089, Jardim das Acácias - SP
E-mail: dersonlopes@me.com
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2391-8733

Josmar Sionti Arrais de Matos
Doutor em Liderança
Institution: Aspectum Business School (ABS)
Address: Avenida Roque Petroni Júnior, 1089, Jardim das Acácias - SP
E-mail: josmar.arrais@aspectum.com.br
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7383-1388

Thiago Gusmão Cardoso
Doutor em Educação e Saúde na Infância e Adolescência
Institution: Universidade Federal de São Paulo (UNIFESP), Centro Universitário Adventista de São Paulo (UNASP)
Address: Estrada de Itapecerica, 5859, São Paulo - SP
E-mail: thiago.cardoso@unasp.edu.br
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9313-5219
ABSTRACT
Purpose: The pandemic caused by the new sars-cov-2 variant significantly modified working conditions. In this context of crisis, leaders have come to occupy an even more sensitive and strategic place for companies. In this way, this article intended to study how an authentic leadership style could influence employees during the pandemic caused by COVID-19. Methodology: We used a quantitative approach. More specifically, through Structural Equation Modeling, by the SmartPLS 3.0 software, we analyzed data from a survey conducted with 1142 participants. Findings: The results show that organizations led by leaders who are considered authentic by their employees are more likely to take particular actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which contributed to reducing work stress. Additionally, the presence of an authentic leader presents a direct influence on the professional stress levels decreasing of the respondents. Originality: Several studies have analyzed professional contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic, but they have made little correlation with the adopted leadership style, as in this study. In addition, the scope of the sample and the use of Structural Equation Modeling make the article unique.

Keywords: authentic leadership, COVID-19, pandemic, professional stress.
RESUMEN
Propósito: La pandemia causada por la nueva variante del sars-cov-2 modificó significativamente las condiciones de trabajo. En este contexto de crisis, los líderes han llegado a ocupar un lugar aún más sensible y estratégico para las empresas. De esta manera, este artículo tuvo como objetivo estudiar cómo un estilo de liderazgo auténtico podría influir en los empleados durante la pandemia causada por COVID-19. Metodología: Utilizamos un enfoque cuantitativo. Más específicamente, a través de Modelado de Ecuaciones Estructurales, mediante el software SmartPLS 3.0, analizamos datos de una encuesta realizada con 1142 participantes. Resultados: Los resultados muestran que las organizaciones lideradas por líderes considerados auténticos por sus empleados tienen más probabilidades de tomar acciones específicas durante la pandemia de COVID-19, lo que contribuyó a reducir el estrés laboral. Además, la presencia de un líder auténtico presenta una influencia directa en la disminución de los niveles de estrés profesional de los encuestados. Originalidad: Varios estudios han analizado contextos profesionales durante la pandemia de COVID-19, pero han hecho poca correlación con el estilo de liderazgo adoptado, como en este estudio. Además, el alcance de la muestra y el uso de Modelado de Ecuaciones Estructurales hacen que el artículo sea único.

Palabras clave: liderazgo auténtico, COVID-19, pandemia, estrés profesional.

1 INTRODUCTION

The public policy of social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic significantly modified working conditions. Thousands of people have been severely affected in their areas of expertise, including unemployment, forced leave, reduced working hours, reduced wages, working from home, changing commitments, and the establishment of goals. All those changes brought the significant potential for work-related accidents, such as family tensions resulting from the risks of the disease itself. In this scenario, organizations have become a scenario to manifest professional stress from different natures on the relationship with their employees and in the maintenance of their daily activities. This stress in professional activities arises from the perception of not being able to embrace the demands of work, resulting in psychological distress, change of behavior, negative attitudes towards work, and increased cardiovascular risk (QUICK e HENDERSON, 2016).

Leadership has come to occupy an even more sensitive and strategic place for companies in this context of crisis. Among the leadership concepts in the literature,
authentic leadership has been consolidated as a concept of positive organizational behavior, ethical leadership, and transformational leadership (GILL e CAZA, 2018; HOCH et al., 2018). Although the notion of authenticity has already existed for centuries, this concept only appeared in academic literature in the 2000s, with the beginning of the positive psychology movement (LUTHANS e AVOLIO, 2003). Positive Leadership has undergone enormous changes and had its scope expanded, discussed, and adapted to different contexts, implementation, and organizational models. Authentic leadership attractiveness and appreciation in organizational studies have constantly grown, especially for its contribution and proven positive results for employees and companies (BANKS et al., 2016; CHULLY et al., 2022; GARDNER et al., 2011; GILL e CAZA, 2018; HOCH et al., 2018). This study aimed to analyze organizations led by authentic leaders who positioned themselves as sensitive during the COVID-19 crisis, and whether this leadership style impacted the responses of their employees to the tensions and professional stress of this pandemic period. In addition to demographic and analytical factors obtained through a survey, to measure the stress, the research considered the Portuguese version of the job scale produced by Alves et al. (2004) and Hökerberg et al. (2014) and relied on the Avolio et al. (2004) to evaluate the authentic leadership effects.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Authentic leadership has come to occupy a highlighted place and has aroused the interest of academics and practitioners of management. This interest is mainly due to the lack of trustful leaders in organizations in the face of several corporate scandals in the 1990s and 2000s (AVOLIO et al., 2004; GEORGE et al., 2007).

Although Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) could see authenticity as a simple extension of transformational leadership, later studies consider authentic leadership as an independent concept, derived from positive aspects of charismatic, transformational, spiritual, and ethical leadership (ILIES et al., 2005; YUKL, 2010).

Luthans and Avolio (2003) define authentic leadership as the process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context. Likewise, Walumbwa et al. (2008, p. 94) affirm that authentic leadership is "a
pattern of leader behavior that promotes positive psychological abilities, and an ethical environment to promote self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency from leaders with followers promoting positive self-development”. In a close look, authenticity expresses itself in solid aspects of one's existence, such as leading others (KERNIS, 2003). Shamir and Eilam (2005) also says that an authentic leader possesses a greater level of self-resolution or clarity of self-awareness.

One of the great contributions to the study of Authentic Leadership was the study of Walumbwa et al. (2008), which presents the subject subdivided into four different dimensions: the leadership's relational transparency, balanced processing, internalized moral perspective, and self-awareness. The leader's balanced processing of information refers to an extension they pursue, analyzing and evaluating closely all information that exists before making decisions, even if those point of view challenge their own views (GARDNER et al., 2011). Internalized moral perspective refers to an extension to which behaviors are aimed and compatible with one's personal values and moral standards, while relational transparency involves the extension in which followers have the perception that leaders are expressing their true thoughts and feelings. Finally, self-awareness involves the perception to what extent one's own strengths and weaknesses, recognizing how their decisions affect others and being aware of how others perceive their leadership (GARDNER et al., 2011). Theory and data suggest that combining these four dimensions is an additive way to create authentic leadership (CAZA et al., 2010; MORIANO et al., 2011; WALUMBWA et al., 2008).

In a more business-focused approach, George describes authentic leaders as those who develop self-awareness from their own experiences, act according to their consciousness, practice their values even though it may result in substantial risk to their position, balance their own motivations, internal and external impulses while maintaining a strong and supportive team around them; and, live truthfulness rooted lives.

Several studies have sought to measure the positive impacts of authentic leadership and have found different styles of contributions to organizations and employees such as the pursuit of organizational commitment (PEUS et al., 2012); greater freedom of expression for employees (HSIUNG, 2012); commitment to work (WANG e
HSIEH, 2013); concern for well-being at work (Laschinger et al., 2013); development of altruism, team spirit, social virtue, conscience, courtesy, affective commitment and resourcefulness at work (RIBEIRO et al., 2018; WONG e LASCHINGER, 2013).

Especially related to the focus of the present study, researchers have found benefits directly associated with the mental health of employees (BARON, 2016; LEROY et al., 2012; QUICK e HENDERSON, 2016; ZHANG et al., 2021).

2.1 PROFESSIONAL / JOB STRESS MEASURE

Job stress arises from one's perception of not being able to embrace the demands of work, resulting in psychological distress, behavioral changes, negative attitudes toward work, and increased cardiovascular risk (QUICK e HENDERSON, 2016). Among the models, Robert Karasek's demand-control model stands out to explain occupational stress. In 1979, Karasek found that workers whose jobs were classified as high-demand and low-control (measured by the height of decisions) reported significant work exhaustion. In the demand-control model, demands are measured based on speed, intensity, effort, and conflicting demands at work, while control is measured by decision latitude, issues such as learning, skill level, initiative, and repetition of tasks, as well as a self-deciding authority about what to do and how to work (CHUNGKHAM et al., 2013; HÖKERBERG et al., 2014).

This model also possibilities to classify the job from the joining of the magnitude of dimensions, psychological demand, and control (KARASEK, 1979), such as active type – characterized by high demand and high control; passive type – characterized by low demand and low control; high demand – characterized by high demand and low control; and finally, low demand, – resulting from the combination of low demand and high control. Based on this approach, which focuses the assessment of occupational stress risk on the way work is organized, it is possible to investigate the repercussions of changes in the organization of work as a response to an event, such as COVID-19.
2.2 CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Based on the analyzed studies, it was established the conceptual model of this study, is shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1 – Conceptual Model](image)

The guideline for the hypotheses of the research are:

- **H1**: The presence of an authentic leader in the organization increases the probability of special actions during a pandemic.
- **H2**: When the company chooses for special actions during the crisis, it reduces professional stress.
- **H3**: Authentic leaders mitigated the professional stress of their employees during the pandemic. In the next section, the methodological procedures are detailed.

3 MATERIAL AND METHODS

This current study was conducted with a quantitative methodology of use, using multivariate data analysis resources. Since the objectives are to say and explain the presented constructs, according to suggestions from Hair et al. (2018), the modeling of structural equations with the technique of partial least squares (PLS-SEM) was used.
The research count on demographic and socioeconomic issues, aiming to determine the sample profile and also analyze these factors in the perception of the respondents. To measure Authentic Leadership, the study by Avolio et al., (2004) named the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire was used. In order to use this resource, a previous contact with the company Mind Gardern, the owner of the study was necessary, which authorized the free use after filling out a disclaimer for using the instrument exclusively in academic research. It is possible to opt for the Portuguese version of the questionnaire, which was used in this study. Respondents rated their leaders according to the conditioning of the inventory.

To measure the respondent's professional stress level, some assertive questions based on the short version of demand and control produced by the Job Stress Scale were chosen and adapted for the Brazilian context, as also questions about the measures taken related to COVID-19. Table 1 presents the list of conceptions and their respective indicators.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conception</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authentic Leadership</td>
<td>LA1 Say exactly what they think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA2 Admit their mistakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA3 Encourage all to say their thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA4 Say hard-hitting truths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA5 Show emotions corresponding to their feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA6 Their actions are consistent with their believes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA7 Make decisions based on their fundamental values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA8 Ask me to make decisions based on my essential values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA9 Make hard decisions based on high ethical standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA10 Ask me for points of view that question their deepest stance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA11 Analyzes relevant information before making a decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA12 Carefully listen to different points of view before drawing conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA13 Seeks to get information (feedback) from people to improve interaction with them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA14 Have a clear notion of how others figure their abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA15 Understand when it's time to reevaluate their positions on important issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LA16 Understand how their actions impact others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Stress</td>
<td>SP1 Have to complete the tasks at work real quickly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(SP)</td>
<td>SP2 Have to produce a plenty in a short time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SP3 The job demands too much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SP4 Have enough time to complete the tasks from work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SP5 Often have contradictory or conflicting requirements at work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SP6 Have the opportunity to learn new things at work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SP7 The job requires a lot of skill or specialized knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SP8 The job requires to take initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP9</td>
<td>Have to repeat the same tasks many times at work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP10</td>
<td>Can choose HOW to do the work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP11</td>
<td>Can choose WHAT to do at work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AC1</td>
<td>The company offers psychological support to situations faced during the COVID-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AC2</td>
<td>The company has been comprehensive in the difficulties during the COVID-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AC3</td>
<td>The company had taken clear measures facing COVID-19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own authorship

The catalog to evaluate opinions was developed on a Likert scale. This model was chosen given its popularity for assessing behavioral issues. The scale created was: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, and Fully Agree. For statistical purposes, it was established weights 1, 2, 3, and 4 for each of the answers. All questions had the option “I have no opinion”, for those who did not fit the options.

The questionnaire was applied digitally, using the Microsoft Forms tool, since this tool allows various analyses of graphs in itself, and exports in an organized manner all data obtained from respondents to a single Excel spreadsheet. The response link was widely publicized on social media and by email, being open for responses between 05/21/20 and 05/28/20. In total, 1,142 people were achieved.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data analysis sought to study the demographic data of the samples and the respondents' opinions to later explore information in multivariate analysis. Table 2 provides a summary of the descriptive statics, especially portraying the demographic cut of the sample.
Table 2. Summary of the descriptive statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>n = 1142 (100)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Age</td>
<td>39 Years Old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Gender</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have Children in School-Age</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perform leadership role</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Income*</td>
<td>2**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Level*</td>
<td>4**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Experience*</td>
<td>3**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Subtitle: Income: 0: Up to BRL 1,800.00; 1: from BRL 1,801.00 to BRL 3,600.00; 2: from BRL 3,601.00 to BRL 6,000.00; 3: from BRL 6,001.00 to BRL 10,000.00; 4: Above 10,001.00.
Education Level: 0: Elementary School; 1: High School; 2: Attending University - higher education; 3: Interrupted higher education; 4: Complete higher education; 5: Graduate/MBA; 6: Master’s; 7: Doctorate.
Professional Experience: 0: None; 1: Less than 1 year; 2: 1 to 3 years; 3: 3 to 5 years; 4: More than 5 years.

**Expressed by the Mode calculated with the answers of the scale Likert.
Source: Own authorship

Highlights the female predominance in the survey, with 61% of respondents. Data referring to marital status, children, and leadership roles are important to visualize the magnitude of the challenge of adapting to the pandemic context of the respondents. Strengthening the robustness of the sample, notice that most respondents have completed higher education, and have more than three years of professional experience. These characteristics increase the possibility of assertiveness in the evaluation. Regarding the direct impacts of the pandemic, after the COVID-19 crisis, 91% of the participants started working at home, 4% declared having lost their jobs and 22.17% had their salary reduced, not necessarily accompanied by a reduction in workload.

4.1 HYPOTHESES VALIDATION

The research model has only formative indicators, therefore the criteria for validation of the models are convergent validity, multicollinearity analysis, significance, and relevance (HAIR et al., 2017). The redundancy analysis determined the convergent validity, through the correlation of formative construct variables with a global measure of the indicator, in this case, applied to authentic leadership and to professional stress. The constructs were modeled as an independent variable and the global measure as a dependent variable. According to Hair et al. (2017), in order to be considered with
convergent validity, the coefficient value must be above 0.80. The values found were 0.813 for Authentic Leadership, 0.800 for Actions in COVID-19, and 0.801 for Professional Stress, therefore, validated. Collinearity was also satisfactory, as all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were below five (HAIR et al., 2017).

The bootstrapping technique analyzes the significance and relevance of the study. The P-value was 0.000 for all three constructs, therefore adequate. In Outer Loadings, all indicators were also satisfactory (EFRON e TIBSHIRANI, 1994). Table 3 presents the summary of the validation of the hypotheses, and Figure 2 presents the model of the final results after the quantitative analysis.

Table 3. Summary of the Hypothesis Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>H.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Coef.</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>T-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>The presence of the authentic leader in the organization increases the probability of special actions during the pandemic</td>
<td>Authentic Leadership -&gt; COVID-19 actions</td>
<td>0.563</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>24.434</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Confirmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>When the company opts for special actions during the crisis, it reduces professional stress</td>
<td>Actions COVID-19 -&gt; Stress</td>
<td>0.256</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>11.878</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Confirmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>Authentic leaders reduced the professional stress of their employees during the pandemic</td>
<td>Authentic Leadership -&gt; Stress</td>
<td>0.363</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>8.709</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Confirmed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own authorship
Since all the requirements of the quantitative tests were attended, it can be said that the three hypotheses were confirmed in the study. In accordance to the studies that supported the theoretical concept of this research, it can be seen that, in the analyzed sample, the authentic leader is more concerned with maintaining the commitment of his team and pursuing the well-being of the group (Laschinger et al., 2013; Peus et al., 2012), in this context, manifested by the greater higher probability of promoting actions on behalf of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was noted that these actions influenced the employees' professional stress reduction. Finally, corroborating the studies by Macik-Frey et al. (2009); Leroy et al. (2012); Baron (2016); and Zhang et al. (2021), the authentic leader contributes to the well-being and mental health of their collaborators, in this sample verified by the influence to reduce the work stress of the collaborators when they notice in their leader the authentic leadership style.

5 CONCLUSION

The influence of different leadership styles on the results of an organization has been studied for a long time, especially regarding the commitment of its employees. The moments of crisis are the most nerve-racking contexts for a leader to show his real concern for people, especially for their well-being.
The COVID-19 pandemic has had different impacts on people's professional and personal lives, putting them in a situation of instability and insecurity in the multiple spheres of their daily lives. This scenario created a favorable environment for the development of professional stress and health imbalance.

This article intended to study how an authentic leadership style could influence employees during the pandemic caused by COVID-19. The responses of 1142 participants were analyzed using the quantitative method of structural equation modeling. The results show that organizations led by leaders who are considered authentic by their employees are more likely to take particular actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which contributed to reducing work stress. Additionally, the presence of an authentic leader presents a direct influence on the professional stress level decreasing of the respondents.

The findings of this article can make important contributions to the organizational environment. Firstly, it demonstrates to companies that investments in the development of their leaders have direct consequences on the organizational environment, in addition to proving that special actions in times of crisis can be of great contribution to the employees' lives. For workers, this study demonstrates that tolerating bad leaders can compromise their mental health, awakening the need to look for workplaces where they are duly respected by their supervisors, managers, and directors. Finally, the survey is a warning to leaders of the most diverse hierarchical levels about how their behavior can influence the well-being and mental health of their teams. Manifesting behaviors related to authentic leadership can make a special contribution to everyone, which not only translates into greater commitment and better results in companies but denotes the social role of a leader in spreading their positive influence in the community and thereby helping people to be mentally healthier, balanced and thus exercise better their different roles in society.
REFERENCES


