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Author(s): Pensar, Heini; Degbey, William Y.; Nduka, Kalu A.

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Leadership Behaviours that Drive Engagement

Heini Pensar

School of Management, University of Vaasa, Finland

William Y. Degbey

School of Management, University of Vaasa, Finland

Kalu A. Nduka

Oxford Business College, United Kingdom

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Introduction and Theoretical Foundations

The behaviours that leaders exhibit have a profound impact on employee engagement. Leadership behaviours shape the organisational climate, influence team dynamics, and affect how employees perceive their roles and responsibilities (Iddrisu and Mohammed, 2025). Engaged employees are those who feel connected to their work, motivated to contribute, and aligned with organisational goals (Tóth-Király et al., 2023). Leaders play a critical role in fostering this engagement by demonstrating behaviours that inspire trust, provide direction, and create an environment where employees feel supported and empowered. Leadership behaviours that drive engagement are not limited to those associated with traditional command-and-control models; instead, they emphasise inclusivity, emotional intelligence, and the ability to connect with employees on a personal level (Zheng et al., 2023).

In today's workplace, where employees seek meaning, autonomy, and a sense of purpose in their work, leaders must adopt behaviours that encourage these needs. Engaging leadership behaviours are those that create a supportive environment where employees are encouraged to take ownership of their tasks, feel valued for their contributions, and are given the tools and opportunities they need to grow. Leaders who are approachable, transparent, and empathetic foster a culture of trust and collaboration, which in turn drives higher levels of engagement (Zheng et al., 2023). These behaviours are particularly important in diverse and dynamic organisational settings, where employees' motivations and expectations vary widely. Inclusive leadership strengthens employees' perceived insider status and relational coordination, which helps convert diversity into higher engagement (Naseer et al., 2024). Effective leaders must demonstrate flexibility and adaptability in how they engage with their teams to meet these varying needs.

Employee engagement is not just about individual effort; it is also about the environment that leaders create. Leadership behaviours that drive engagement help build a culture where employees are not only motivated to perform but are also emotionally connected to the organisation and its mission. Leaders who consistently demonstrate positive behaviours, such as providing constructive feedback, recognising achievements, and fostering open communication, create the conditions necessary for sustained engagement. Conversely, leadership behaviours that are negative or disengaging—such as micromanagement, lack of communication, or disregard for employee wellbeing—can lead to disengagement, higher turnover, and decreased productivity.

The theoretical foundations of leadership behaviours that drive engagement can be understood through several key frameworks. Transformational leadership, first introduced by Bass (1985), is one of the most widely studied models linking leadership behaviours to employee engagement. Transformational leaders inspire and motivate their employees by communicating a clear and compelling vision, encouraging innovation, and fostering a sense of purpose. This leadership style involves behaviours such as providing intellectual stimulation, offering individualised consideration, and demonstrating idealised influence. Transformational leaders engage employees by empowering them to take initiative, think creatively, and pursue personal development (Boccoli et al., 2024). The trust and connection fostered by transformational leadership behaviours are essential for creating an engaged and committed workforce.

Transactional leadership, in contrast, focuses on the exchange relationship between leaders and employees, where engagement is driven by contingent rewards and clear expectations (Bass, 1985). Transactional leadership behaviours such as setting clear goals, providing feedback on performance, and rewarding achievements can drive engagement by giving employees a sense of direction and clarity. Recent evidence suggests, however, that transactional leadership has weaker direct effects on engagement than transformational leadership (Ali et al., 2024). However, transactional leadership alone may not be sufficient to sustain long-term engagement, as it does not address employees' deeper needs for meaning, autonomy, and relatedness. To truly drive engagement, transactional behaviours must be combined with more transformational elements that focus on personal growth and emotional connection.

Servant leadership, developed by Greenleaf (1970), offers another model for understanding how leadership behaviours drive engagement. Servant leaders prioritise the needs of their employees, focusing on their well-being, development, and empowerment. Behaviours associated with servant leadership—such as listening, showing empathy, and promoting collaboration—create an environment where employees feel supported and valued (Aboramadan et al., 2022). Servant leaders engage their teams by fostering a sense of trust and inclusion, which encourages employees to invest in their work and the organisation. This leadership style is particularly effective in promoting engagement in organisations that prioritise employee well-being and long-term development over short-term results.

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), emphasises the importance of the relationship between leaders and their employees in driving engagement. According to LMX theory, leaders develop unique relationships with each member of their team, characterised by varying degrees of trust, respect, and support. Employees who have high-quality exchanges with their leaders—marked by frequent communication, mutual respect, and shared decision-making—are more likely to be engaged (Tóth-Király et al., 2023). LMX theory suggests that leadership behaviours such as recognising individual contributions, providing regular feedback, and offering support and mentorship are critical for building strong leader-employee relationships that foster engagement.

Emotional intelligence (EI) is another critical factor in leadership behaviours that drive engagement. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability of leaders to recognise, understand, and manage their own emotions, as well as the emotions of others (Goleman, 1995). Leaders with high emotional intelligence demonstrate behaviours such as empathy, active listening, and emotional regulation, which help create a positive and supportive work environment. While EI is widely emphasised in leadership discourse, rigorous evidence on its effects requires careful methodological design (Lindebaum and Cartwright, 2010). Emotionally intelligent leaders are better equipped to understand the emotional needs of their employees, respond to challenges in a constructive manner, and foster a culture of psychological safety—an essential component of engagement. Employees are more likely to feel connected to their work and engaged when their leaders are emotionally attuned to their needs and create an atmosphere of trust and openness.

Authentic leadership, as described by Avolio and Gardner (2005), also plays a key role in driving engagement through leadership behaviours. Authentic leaders are those who demonstrate transparency, self-awareness, and ethical behaviour in their interactions with employees. Authentic leadership behaviours such as honesty, integrity, and consistency help build trust and foster a positive organisational culture. Employees who perceive their leaders as authentic are more likely to be engaged, as they trust their leaders and feel secure in their roles. Authentic leadership behaviours create an environment where employees feel empowered to express their ideas and contribute meaningfully to the organisation.

Job demands-resources (JD-R) theory, developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), further illustrates how leadership behaviours can influence engagement by balancing job demands and resources. Leaders who provide employees with the necessary resources—such as support, autonomy, and opportunities for development—help mitigate the negative effects of job demands such as stress and workload. Longitudinal evidence shows that engaging leadership builds personal and team resources that increase engagement and team effectiveness (Mazzetti and Schaufeli, 2022). Leadership behaviours that focus on resource provision, such as delegating responsibilities, offering training, and providing feedback, enhance engagement by enabling employees to manage their workloads effectively and maintain a sense of control over their work. JD-R theory highlights the importance of leadership in creating a work environment that supports engagement by ensuring employees have the resources they need to thrive.

Psychological safety, as defined by Edmondson (1999), is another critical element in understanding leadership behaviours that drive engagement. Psychological safety refers to the belief that employees can express their ideas, take risks, and share concerns without fear of negative consequences. Leaders who foster psychological safety create an environment where employees feel comfortable being themselves and engaging fully in their work (Nembhard and Edmondson, 2012). Leadership behaviours such as encouraging open communication, valuing diverse perspectives, and provid-

ing constructive feedback contribute to a psychologically safe workplace. In such an environment, employees are more likely to feel engaged, as they know that their contributions are valued and that they can take risks without fear of retribution.

Practical Applications and Strategies for Leadership Behaviours that Drive Engagement

To cultivate a highly engaged workforce, leaders must adopt behaviours that foster trust, empowerment, and motivation. The behaviours that leaders exhibit directly influence how employees perceive their roles, their connection to the organisation's mission, and their sense of belonging. Engaged employees are those who are motivated not just by extrinsic rewards but by a genuine connection to their work and the organisation. To drive engagement effectively, leaders must focus on building strong relationships, promoting individual and collective growth, and fostering a culture where employees feel valued and empowered. Below are several key leadership behaviours that contribute to a highly engaged workforce.

Practical Strategies for Driving Engagement

One of the most important leadership behaviours for driving engagement is the ability to inspire a sense of purpose and alignment with the organisation's goals. Leaders who can clearly articulate the organisation's vision and mission, while also showing how each employee's role contributes to achieving those objectives, foster a deeper connection between employees and their work (Boccoli et al., 2024). Transformational leaders excel in this area, as they motivate their teams by providing a compelling vision and encouraging employees to transcend their self-interest for the sake of the organisation (Bass, 1985). When employees see their contributions as part of a larger purpose, their engagement increases, as they feel a stronger sense of meaning and importance in their work.

Leaders can also enhance this sense of purpose by encouraging employees to take an active role in shaping the organisation's direction. This may involve inviting employees to participate in decision-making processes or offering opportunities for them to contribute to the development of new initiatives. When employees feel that they have a voice and are part of something bigger than their immediate tasks, their engagement and commitment to the organisation deepen. Inclusive leader practices that integrate employee voice reinforce insider status and coordination, deepening engagement (Naseer et al., 2024). Empowering employees to co-create the future of the

organisation fosters a sense of ownership and pride, which are critical components of sustained engagement.

Fostering Growth and Development

Leadership behaviours that support employee growth and development are key drivers of engagement. Employees are more likely to be engaged when they feel that their leaders are invested in their personal and professional development (Dore, 2023). This aligns with the principles of servant leadership, which emphasises prioritising the needs and growth of employees (Greenleaf, 1970). Servant leaders focus on creating opportunities for their employees to develop new skills, take on new challenges, and advance in their careers. This approach not only enhances engagement by showing employees that they are valued, but it also helps retain top talent, as employees are more likely to stay with an organisation that supports their long-term growth.

Providing clear feedback, mentorship, and coaching are also essential leadership behaviours that contribute to employee engagement. Leaders who take the time to give constructive feedback help employees improve their performance and grow in their roles (Chaudhary, 2025). By offering support and guidance, leaders build trust and create an environment where employees feel confident in their ability to succeed. Moreover, employees who feel that their leaders are genuinely interested in their success are more likely to be motivated to take on new challenges and strive for excellence.

Building Strong, Trust-Based Relationships

The quality of relationships between leaders and employees is another critical factor in driving engagement. Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory highlights the importance of high-quality, trust-based relationships between leaders and their team members (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Leaders who engage in open communication, provide consistent support, and recognise individual contributions foster a work environment where employees feel valued and respected. High-quality LMX relationships are associated with stronger engagement trajectories and favourable employee outcomes (Tóth-Király et al., 2023). These positive relationships enhance employee loyalty and commitment to the organisation, as employees are more likely to go the extra mile when they feel that their leaders are genuinely invested in their well-being and success.

Trust is the foundation of these strong relationships. Leaders who are transparent, honest, and consistent in their actions build trust over time, creating a psychologically safe environment where employees feel comfortable expressing their ideas and

concerns without fear of negative repercussions. Authentic leadership, which emphasises integrity and transparency, plays a significant role in fostering this trust (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Employees are more likely to engage with leaders who demonstrate authenticity, as they perceive them as trustworthy and reliable.

Promoting Psychological Safety and Inclusion

Psychological safety, the belief that individuals can speak up, take risks, and make mistakes without fear of retribution, is a crucial component of an engaged workforce (Edmondson, 1999). Leaders who foster psychological safety encourage open communication and the free exchange of ideas (Nembhard and Edmondson, 2012). This leadership behaviour is essential for innovation, collaboration, and problem-solving, as employees are more likely to contribute their ideas when they feel safe and supported. Leaders can promote psychological safety by actively seeking input from their teams, listening without judgment, and responding to concerns in a constructive manner.

Incorporating employee voice into decision-making processes further enhances engagement by giving employees a sense of agency and involvement (Gong et al., 2024). When employees feel that their opinions are valued and that they can influence organisational decisions, their sense of ownership and commitment increases (Degbey et al., 2021). Leaders who promote inclusive dialogue and actively encourage diverse perspectives create an environment where employees are more likely to be engaged, as they feel that their contributions matter and that they are an integral part of the organisation's success.

Balancing Job Demands and Resources

Effective leaders also recognise the importance of balancing job demands with the resources employees need to meet those demands. Job demands-resources (JD-R) theory posits that high job demands can lead to burnout and disengagement if not offset by adequate resources (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Leadership behaviours that provide employees with the necessary tools, autonomy, and support to manage their workloads are essential for maintaining high levels of engagement (Mazzetti and Schaufeli, 2022). Leaders who ensure that employees have access to the right resources—whether that's time, technology, or support from colleagues—help mitigate stress and prevent burnout.

Providing autonomy is another important leadership behaviour that drives engagement. Employees who are given the freedom to make decisions and take ownership of their work are more likely to feel empowered and motivated (Boccoli et al.,

2024). This aligns with self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985), which emphasises the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation. Leaders who trust their employees to manage their own tasks and provide the autonomy to do so create an environment where engagement thrives.

Modelling Engagement and Commitment

Leaders must also model the behaviours they wish to see in their teams. Engaged leaders demonstrate commitment, enthusiasm, and a proactive approach to their work, setting an example for their employees to follow. When leaders are visibly invested in the organisation's success and show a genuine passion for their work, it sets a tone that encourages similar levels of engagement from their teams. Leadership visibility and approachability are critical in this regard; leaders who make time for one-on-one meetings, participate in team activities, and are accessible to their employees foster a culture of engagement that permeates all levels of the organisation. In hybrid and remote teams, consistent digital presence and clear communication routines signal accessibility and sustain engagement (Boccoli et al., 2024).

By demonstrating engagement through their own actions, leaders can create a ripple effect throughout the organisation. Employees are more likely to be engaged when they see that their leaders are personally committed to the organisation's goals and values. This modelling behaviour helps create a sense of shared purpose and collective responsibility, driving higher levels of engagement and performance across the board.

Challenges

While the behaviours that drive engagement are widely understood and supported by research, implementing these behaviours consistently across all levels of leadership presents several challenges. One of the key challenges is the variability in leadership styles and the difficulty in cultivating a uniform culture of engagement. Leaders come from diverse backgrounds and bring their own values, experiences, and approaches to leadership, which may not always align with the behaviours that foster engagement (Ashikali, 2023). For example, some leaders may naturally lean towards transactional leadership, focusing on results and performance metrics, rather than engaging in the transformational or servant leadership behaviours that promote employee well-being and empowerment. This lack of alignment can result in inconsistent employee experiences and engagement levels within the same organisation.

Another challenge lies in the development of emotional intelligence (EI) among leaders. While the benefits of emotionally intelligent leadership are well documented,

not all leaders possess the skills required to manage emotions effectively—either their own or those of their employees. Evidence on EI–leadership links is mixed and demands rigorous designs, which can complicate broad capability building (Lindebaum and Cartwright, 2010). Leaders who lack emotional intelligence may struggle to create the supportive, empathetic environments needed for engagement to flourish. Additionally, emotional intelligence is not a skill that can be easily taught through traditional leadership training programs. It requires ongoing development and self-awareness, making it more difficult to implement across an organisation.

Time constraints and competing priorities also present significant barriers for leaders trying to drive engagement. In many organisations, leaders are tasked with managing performance, achieving targets, and navigating complex operational challenges, which can limit the time and energy they have to devote to engagement behaviours (Feuer and Mastrogiovanni, 2025). Providing regular feedback, mentoring employees, and building trust all take time and consistent effort, which can be difficult to prioritise in fast-paced or high-pressure environments. As a result, leaders may default to more transactional behaviours that focus on immediate performance outcomes rather than long-term engagement.

Maintaining engagement in remote and hybrid work environments introduces additional complexities. Remote leadership requires different skills and approaches compared to leading in a traditional office setting. Leaders who are accustomed to face-to-face interactions may find it challenging to build strong, trust-based relationships with remote employees (Dore, 2023). The absence of informal interactions, such as casual conversations and spontaneous check-ins, makes it harder for leaders to gauge employee engagement levels and provide the necessary support. Furthermore, remote work can create a sense of isolation, which leaders must actively work to counterbalance through digital tools and intentional communication strategies.

Organisational culture can also hinder leaders' ability to drive engagement if it does not support the behaviours required for sustained employee motivation. In highly hierarchical or competitive cultures, leadership behaviours that emphasise trust, inclusion, and collaboration may be undervalued or discouraged (Ashikali, 2023). Empirical evidence further shows that socially responsible HRM helps cultivate ethical, supportive climates that enable leaders to sustain engagement-focused behaviours (Pham et al., 2024). Leaders operating in such environments may struggle to adopt engagement-focused behaviours without the necessary organisational support. In addition, if the broader organisational culture prioritises short-term performance metrics over employee well-being and development, it can be difficult for individual leaders to implement engagement strategies effectively.

Future Trends

Several emerging trends are reshaping how leadership behaviours drive engagement, particularly in response to changing workplace dynamics and employee expectations. One of the most significant trends is the growing emphasis on inclusive leadership (Morgan et al., 2025; Naseer et al., 2024). As organisations become more diverse, leaders are increasingly expected to demonstrate behaviours that foster inclusion, equity, and belonging. Inclusive leadership goes beyond recognising diversity; it involves creating an environment where all employees feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute. Leaders who demonstrate inclusive behaviours—such as actively seeking diverse perspectives, addressing unconscious bias, and promoting equal opportunities—are more likely to drive engagement, particularly among underrepresented groups.

The increasing use of technology in leadership is another trend shaping the future of engagement. Leaders are now leveraging digital tools to maintain engagement in remote and hybrid work environments (Boccoli et al., 2024). These tools allow leaders to stay connected with their teams, provide real-time feedback, and monitor engagement levels. Virtual leadership, facilitated by video conferencing, collaboration platforms, and engagement analytics, is becoming a critical skill for leaders in the modern workplace. As technology continues to evolve, leaders will need to integrate digital tools into their leadership strategies to foster engagement effectively. For example, AI-driven platforms may soon be used to provide personalised leadership recommendations based on real-time employee data, enabling leaders to tailor their behaviours to the needs of individual team members.

Emotional intelligence is expected to become an even more important leadership competency in the future, particularly as organisations place greater emphasis on employee well-being and mental health. As the lines between work and personal life continue to blur, especially in remote work environments, leaders will need to demonstrate greater empathy and understanding of their employees' emotional needs. This trend is already evident in the increasing demand for leadership development programs that focus on soft skills, such as emotional regulation, active listening, and conflict resolution. Leaders who can cultivate strong emotional connections with their teams will be better positioned to drive engagement in an increasingly complex and emotionally charged workplace (Lindebaum and Cartwright, 2010). Practical guidance also underscores that compassionate leadership – acknowledging employees' personal challenges with care – can reinforce psychological safety and sustain engagement (Ogbonnaya et al., 2024).

The rise of purpose-driven leadership is also shaping the future of engagement. Employees, particularly younger generations, are increasingly seeking meaningful work that aligns with their values and contributes to a larger societal purpose (Durand and Ioannou, 2023). Leaders who can articulate a clear purpose and align the organisation's mission with the personal values of their employees are more likely to engage and retain top talent. Evidence also indicates that leadership which promotes

employee flourishing and honours moral obligations under pressure can sustain engagement in extreme or high-stress conditions (Zoogah et al., 2025).

This trend is particularly relevant as employees place greater importance on corporate social responsibility, sustainability, and ethical leadership. Leaders who demonstrate authenticity, transparency, and a commitment to ethical practices will be better equipped to inspire long-term engagement among employees who prioritise purpose over profit.

Flexible leadership is another trend that is gaining momentum. In an era of rapid technological advancements and shifting work patterns, leaders must be adaptable and open to change (Dore, 2023). Flexible leadership involves being able to adjust leadership behaviours and strategies to meet the evolving needs of employees and the organisation. This trend is particularly relevant in the context of hybrid work models, where leaders must balance the needs of both in-office and remote employees. Leaders who can flexibly navigate these different environments, while maintaining consistent engagement strategies, will be better positioned to foster a cohesive and motivated workforce.

Finally, the focus on continuous learning and development is expected to remain a key component of leadership behaviours that drive engagement. As industries evolve and new skills become necessary, leaders will need to prioritise ongoing learning opportunities for their teams. Leaders who invest in the continuous development of their employees, providing them with the resources and support needed to stay competitive in a changing job market, will not only drive engagement but also enhance retention (Verheijen-Tiemstra et al., 2024). The rise of personalised learning platforms and digital learning tools will enable leaders to provide tailored development opportunities, ensuring that employees feel valued and supported in their growth.

Conclusion

Leadership behaviours play a crucial role in driving employee engagement, with transformational, servant, and authentic leadership styles emerging as particularly effective in fostering a culture of trust, inclusion, and motivation (Boccoli et al., 2024). Theoretical frameworks such as transformational leadership theory, servant leadership, and emotional intelligence highlight the importance of behaviours that prioritise employee well-being, development, and empowerment. Leaders who adopt these behaviours—such as providing clear direction, fostering psychological safety, and building strong relationships—create an environment where employees feel connected to their work, motivated to contribute, and aligned with the organisation's goals.

However, the implementation of engagement-focused leadership behaviours presents several challenges, including variability in leadership styles, emotional intel-

ligence gaps, and time constraints. Additionally, the rise of remote and hybrid work models has introduced new complexities for leaders seeking to maintain engagement across geographically dispersed teams. Organisational culture can also pose barriers, particularly in environments where short-term performance metrics are prioritised over employee well-being and development (Ashikali, 2023).

Looking ahead, several trends are expected to shape the future of leadership behaviours that drive engagement. Inclusive leadership, virtual leadership, and emotional intelligence are becoming increasingly important as organisations respond to changing employee expectations and workplace dynamics. Purpose-driven leadership, flexible leadership, and continuous learning (Laker, 2023) will also play key roles in fostering long-term engagement, particularly as employees seek meaningful work, adaptability, and opportunities for growth (Naseer et al., 2024). By embracing these trends and continuing to prioritise engagement-focused behaviours, leaders can create a motivated, resilient, and high-performing workforce that drives organisational success.

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