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# **The impact of leadership on employee work engagement**

Evidence from MNCs operating in Finland

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**ABSTRACT:**

Due to their complex structure, multinational corporations (MNCs) rely on leaders to foster employee work engagement. In particular, developing a sense of engagement among employees is a strategic tool that MNCs can use to retain the best talents within their organisation, and thus maintain competitiveness in the global market. In this process, leaders have the power to influence employee engagement with their leadership practices, and by building high quality relationships with their employees. Extensive previous literature on this topic has focused on analysing the causal relationships between different leadership styles and employee engagement by considering only employees' perspective.

Therefore, this research aims to understand how leaders influence the work engagement of employees in MNCs, by using a dyadic perspective, so including also the leader's viewpoint, and by grounding on the concept of positive leadership, without distinguishing between different styles. Also, the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory is considered, as theoretical perspective explaining the relationship between leaders and employees. The current study responds to the call for qualitative research in the field, as data were collected from nine semi-structured interviews. Specifically, the sample includes both leaders and employees from three different teams of three MNCs operating in Finland in similar fields.

The findings of the research explain the understanding of the concept of engagement and the role of the leader in enhancing it. Firstly, they suggest that both leaders and employees in MNCs have a similar understanding of work engagement, which is initially fostered by the multinational context, and then also by personal and organisational factors. Secondly, results demonstrate that leaders influence engagement both directly and indirectly through leadership, and the leader-member relationship. Specifically, leaders need to provide employees with autonomy and feedback, support their personal and professional needs, set up a positive tone in the team and give example of values and work attitudes, as well as to establish a tailored and equal relationship with each of their subordinates, based on caring interpersonal behaviours, open communication and mutual understanding.

As a result, the current study extends previous research with its new perspectives and emerging themes. It also provides practical recommendations that MNCs' leaders should take to promote employee engagement among their team members.

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**KEYWORDS:** work engagement, leadership, leaders, employees, multinational corporations

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## Abbreviations

MNC/MNE = Multinational corporation/Multinational enterprise

LMX = Leader-member exchange

JD-R = Job demands-resource model/theory

SDT = Self-determination theory

SLT = Social learning theory

SET = Social exchange theory

ILT = Implicit leadership theory

IFT = Implicit followership theory

DRQ = Dyadic relationship quality

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background of the study

Globalisation has opened new ways of doing business, and thus created a global market, which offers wider access to resources and growth opportunities. As result, firms have internationalised expanding their operations in several countries, therefore becoming multinational corporations (MNCs) (Cavusgil et al., 2020). Despite there may be diverse motives behind the decision to set operations in a foreign country, there is always one common denominator: to grant company's profitability and long-term success (Cavusgil et al., 2020; Magnani, 2021). To ensure that, MNCs leverage on different internal resources, and among those, employees are one of the key assets (Cavusgil et al., 2020). This is because they translate company's strategies into practice, so their perception of those plans and performance, drive MNCs success in the global market (Jain et al., 2014; Stor, 2022).

Every MNC therefore needs to have highly skilled and high performing people within its organisation. However, having multinational's presence means dealing with national differences, and thus facing issues that do not necessarily exist in the home country (Pucik et al., 2023). In fact, multinational companies strive to find strategies to attract and retain the best employees within their organisation (Pucik et al., 2023; Tlaiss et al., 2017). Hence, MNCs need to be appealing in the global labour market by creating a positive working environment where people want to work. In particular, any business is built on relationships and shared values, so successful companies are those socially integrated and able to connect with their employees (Pucik et al., 2023). This means that MNCs should not focus only on developing employees' professional skills, but also on fostering their sense of engagement at work. In fact, MNCs that create high levels of employee work engagement, are the ones who perform better and maintain their competitiveness (Pucik et al., 2023).

Employee work engagement has been studied for several years, due to its implications both on organisations and individuals (Rahmadani & Schaufeli, 2022). Research shows that engaged employees tend to perform better at work (Borst et al., 2020; Gutermann et al., 2017; Zhong et al., 2016), which in turn leads to higher financial returns (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009) and increased customer loyalty and satisfaction (Harter et al., 2002; Radic et al., 2020; Salanova et al., 2005). In fact, work engagement gives employees a positive attitude towards the organisation (Boccoli et al., 2023) with elements such as openness, innovative working, personal responsibility and commitment (Bakker et al., 2023; Hager, 2018; Kong & Li, 2018). As a result, engaged employees experience higher job satisfaction (Boccoli et al., 2023; Mazzetti et al., 2023), which means lower turnover intentions (Allen et al., 2010; Tlaiss et al., 2017; Zhong et al., 2016) and higher career success (Bakker, 2022; Hakanen et al., 2021). This also increases their life satisfaction (Shimazu & Schaufeli, 2009), as engaged workers are aware of their limits and value their private life (Schaufeli, 2021). Taking all this into account, work engagement directly supports the profitability and competitive advantage of MNCs by ensuring superior corporate performances (Hooi, 2021; Stor, 2022). Likewise, it contributes to the creation of a positive work environment in MNCs, which fosters personal and professional growth, and is therefore able to attract and retain talents (Allen et al., 2010; Hakanen et al., 2021; Presbitero et al., 2019; Wen et al., 2018).

In particular, literature identifies leadership as one of the main elements influencing work engagement, due to the direct impact that leaders have on organisation and human behaviour (Dimitrov, 2015; Saks, 2019; Zahari & Kaliannan, 2023). Specifically, in a multinational setting, leaders have a pivotal role in connecting people from diverse countries and in enhancing positive behaviours like trust, motivation, commitment, and effective collaboration (Gibbon, 2023; Hundschell et al., 2022; Muzondiwa et al., 2022; Palalic & Ait Sidi Mhamed, 2020; Panaccio et al., 2015; Rexhepi et al., 2017). In fact, they provide to subordinates resources for their job (Bakker et al., 2023; Schaufeli, 2015) and guide them in gaining autonomy and self-confidence (Mehrad et al., 2020; Schaufeli, 2015), thus supporting their adaptation to changes and resilience (Jorge Correia de

Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2014; van Tuin et al., 2020). Besides, leaders themselves are considered as a model to follow (Brown & Treviño, 2014; Butt et al., 2019; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020), so they directly influence subordinates through their attitudes and behaviours, which are expression of their leadership style (Anderson & Sun, 2017). Traditionally, the dominant position of the literature was to distinguish between transactional and transformational styles (Anderson & Sun, 2017; Nanjunde & Swamy, 2014), but in the last decades authors have introduced new concepts like ethical, authentic, servant and engaging leadership (Avolio et al., 2009; Carasco-Saul et al., 2015; Rahmadani & Schaufeli, 2022).

Leaders' conduct varies also according to the relationship with their followers. In fact, leaders create and develop a unique and mutual relationship with each of their subordinates, that is built on the reciprocal exchange of benefits (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Specifically, if followers perceive a positive relationship, then they are motivated to undertake positive behaviours and attitudes, which rise stronger work engagement (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Liu et al., 2023; Wagner & Koob, 2022). However, the existence of a relationship results in a set of reciprocal expectations, which influence people's behaviours (Coyle & Foti, 2015; Lord et al., 2020). Furthermore, in a multicultural context the creation of a positive leader-follower relationships is impacted by cultural distances and diversity (Pichler et al., 2019). This means that MNC leaders need to cultivate individualised relationships with their subordinates, in order to promote diversity, socialisation and company commitment, and therefore support the creation of their sense of work engagement (Butt et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2014; Khan & Malik, 2017; Pichler et al., 2019; Presbitero, 2020; Qomariyah et al., 2022).

All this given, to my knowledge, there is no research addressing the impact of leadership on work engagement in a multinational context, that considers dyadic perceptions. Boccoli et al., p. (2023, p. 86) suggest to understand work engagement as a "social construct based on social interaction, exchange and recognition", which in this thesis has been applied in terms of leaders and employees' connection. On a general level, a few studies

addressing their relationship have considered both perspectives (Wilson, 2023, p. 84; Yukl & Gardner, 2020, p. 278). However, according to Wilson (2023, p. 84), assessing reciprocal leader-follower expectations and behaviours, it is the only way to develop their relationship to desirable outcomes, like in this case work engagement.

The dominance of a mono-perspective in research, is supported by the use of quantitative methodologies. Studies on work engagement are generally conducted through questionnaires provided to employees (e.g. Rahmadani & Schaufeli, 2022; Wagner & Koob, 2022; Gozukara & Simsek, 2015; Gutermann et al., 2017), so conclusions are drawn upon the analysis of their responses. Besides, also research on leader-follower relationship is mainly based on surveys of individual perceptions, which can be of either leaders' or followers' (Wilson, 2023, p. 87). However, according to Yukl and Gardner (2020, p. 289) personal beliefs and perceptions can influence ratings in questionnaires, meaning that effectiveness of a leader is not objective, but depends strictly on their bond with the follower. Despite that, in general, research uses quantitative methodologies based on measurement scales, which do not allow to study of the full relationship, but just one side of it. According to Wilson (2023, p. 87) more qualitative studies should be conducted, to assess the interaction between leaders and followers.

Additionally, most of research on work engagement has focused on different types of leadership styles (e.g. Carasco-Saul et al., 2015; Rahmadani & Schaufeli, 2022; Ruiz Moreno et al., 2021). However, according to Bormann and Rowold (2018), there has been a proliferation of leadership styles, which consequently tend to overlap. As a result, the authors claim that it would be necessary to narrow them, by clustering them in relation to specific outcomes. For this reason, Decuyper and Schaufeli (2020) developed a model, that explains the shared effect of various positive leadership styles on work engagement. This model is based on the idea positive leaders have similar behaviours in relation to employees' engagement (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020). However, the model explains the mechanisms through which positive leadership influences work engagement but does not specify which types of behaviours are carried out.

## 1.2 Research question, objectives and delimitations

The research question that the thesis aims to answer is the following: “How do leaders influence employees’ work engagement in MNCs?”. In particular, the objectives of the research are to:

- Identify how leaders and employees understand employee work engagement.
- Discover attitudes, actions, behaviours and emotions that leaders should adopt to foster employees’ work engagement.
- Analyse how the relationship between leaders and followers impacts on work engagement.

To meet these objectives, the thesis uses a dyad approach, meaning that it focuses on understanding the phenomenon considering perspectives of both leaders and followers. In response to the call for qualitative studies Wilson (2023), the empirical research of this thesis is conducted using semi-structured interviews. Moreover, the study is focused on MNCs, as its sample is given by leaders and subordinates of MNCs operating in Finland in the fields of engineering, technology, energy and power solutions.

The theoretical framework is based on the combination of leader-member exchange theory (LMX) with an adapted version of the model developed by Decuyper and Schaufeli (2020) about positive leadership styles. Originally, the latter included five pathways (material, motivational, affective, cognitive, and behavioural), that were clustered into three processes (one direct and two indirect). However, the model has been slightly changed to adapt to the thesis framework, so the pathways are interpreted differently.

Besides, as both work engagement and leadership are wide constructs, some terminological disclaimers are necessary. First of all, some authors identify different types of engagement, so for example Macey and Schneider (2008) distinguish among trait, behavioural and state engagement, while Saks (2019) separates the concepts of job, organisational and work engagement. However, for the purposes of this research, it is not essential to make such distinctions, meaning that in this thesis the terms of “work

engagement”, “employee engagement” and “engagement” refer all to the same construct. Similarly, despite there is actual difference between the concepts of leaders and managers (Yukl and Gardner, 2020), this thesis uses them as synonyms. Following the same approach, also “follower”, “subordinate” and “employee” are considered interchangeable.

In addition, an artificial intelligence (AI) disclosure is necessary, to ensure clarity and ethics about the use of AI in the writing process. DeepL Write AI-powered edits was used to proofread some of the paragraphs of the thesis. In detail, this means that the text was completely written by the author, and then checked by the web and free version of the tool, to make it more fluent and to correct grammatical and formal errors. Hence, AI was used only to double check the form of the text, and not for any other purposes.

### **1.3 Structure of the study**

The thesis is structured into five chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction, which sets the context of the study, describing its background and relevance. Here are presented also research question, gaps, and the approach of the thesis, besides to some terminological and practical disclaimers. The literature review is in Chapter 2 and covers the two main topics of the thesis: work engagement and leadership. Specifically, first there is an introduction to work engagement in multinational corporations, which comprises the need to create engagement, its definition, models, and consequences. Then it follows a part about leadership as driver of engagement in multinational companies, which includes the two main theoretical perspectives of the thesis: positive leadership and leader-member exchange theory. The last part of second chapter summarises the discussion into the theoretical framework and explains the logic behind it. Chapter 3 describes the research method, so the methodological perspective of the thesis, and how the research was conducted. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the empirical part of the thesis. Chapter 5 provides a discussion about the findings of the thesis and concludes it, addressing its contributions, limitations and providing suggestions for future research.

## **2 Theoretical background and literature review**

### **2.1 Employee work engagement in multinational corporations**

This chapter is an introduction to the work engagement and its relevance in an international setting. The discussion starts with the description of the context where international companies work, and the reason why they need to create engagement within employees. Then, it follows an overview of the most relevant work engagement definitions and theories, present in the literature. Lastly, there is a description of consequences of engagement. As a result, the purpose of this section is to review the literature on what work engagement is and describe the relevance of the topic grounding both in literature and empirical research in international setting.

International business is made of multiple operations and actors, which need to collaborate and coordinate themselves, in order to pursue their objectives (Cavusgil et al., 2020). Among those, the most influential players are the focal firms, because they undertake international operations. These may be organised in different forms, distinguished in terms of size, physical location of the subsidiaries and number of countries where they operate (Magnani, 2021). One of these, is the multinational corporation (MNC, also known as multinational enterprise, MNE), which Cavusgil et al. (2020, p. 47) define as “a large company with substantial resources that performs various business activities through a network of subsidiaries and affiliates located in multiple countries”.

Despite MNCs may enter a market through various strategies, they usually come up with foreign direct investments, meaning that they physically establish subsidiaries in countries where they operate (Cavusgil et al., 2020; Magnani, 2021). In this way, foreign firms embed into the national economy, determining their presence and playing a significant role within it. For instance, a report by the Department of Management Studies of Aalto University (2021) retrieving data from Statistics Finland, states that there are more than 4000 foreign companies in Finland, that employ around 18% of the national workforce.

The majority of these is owned by foreign multinational corporations, which originate from 43 different countries, mainly European.

MNCs set up operations abroad for a variety of reasons, but they always seek a return on their investment. For example, internationalisation could be based on access to lower-cost resources, the development of economies of scale, better relationships with foreign partners, customer access or the acquisition of new products and technologies (Cavusgil et al., 2020; Magnani, 2021). In any case, the company expects this investment to contribute to its profitability. However, this process is complicated by the need to overcome various barriers to internationalisation. Many of these are caused by uncontrollable external forces, such as the national economic environment, the socio-cultural background, the political forces operating in the countries, the legal and labour systems and the infrastructures (Magnani, 2021).

Besides, internationalisation is also influenced by internal forces, which are controllable internal resources, on which the company can leverage to foster foreign operations (Magnani, 2021). There are several factors that support MNCs' business practises, and among those employees are considered one of the most important strategic assets (Cavusgil et al., 2020). This is because they own the human capital resources that are the drivers of the company's operations (Stor, 2022). Employees are the ones who practically implement the business strategies, and therefore able to achieve the company's goals and performance results. In fact, company's success is driven by employees' performances in the global market, which depends on their perception of the MNCs strategy (Jain et al., 2014). For this reason, working on high quality of human capital and commitment of employees is a critical point for MNCs, which in this way ensure successful operations and therefore, competitiveness and long-term success (Cavusgil et al., 2020; Stor, 2022).

On the other hand, managing people in multiple countries creates a challenge for multinational corporations, which need to understand how successful domestic practises can

be adapted in different countries (Pucik et al., 2023). Differences in cultural, institutional, and legal frameworks, make this operation difficult, because the more a company is spread around countries, the more it struggles to deal with the differences among them (Cavusgil et al., 2020; Pucik et al., 2023). As a result, international HR managers have to deal with factors that are not necessarily present at home, and are therefore faced with new responsibilities, risks and the need for a broader international perspective (Cavusgil et al., 2020). This is because, after all, every multinational company needs to attract the best people to its organisation.

To do this, MNCs need to create a positive working environment where people want to work. Companies strive to attract the best talents, so they need to be competitive in the global labour market (Cappelli, 2009; Kang et al., 2007; Mäkelä et al., 2010), which means they need to provide a place where people can develop both personally and professionally. However, best skilled, and trained employees increase their value, and therefore are more likely to leave the company, if they find better opportunities (Pucik et al., 2023). Research has found several reasons for employee turnover, which are related to work environment and relationships (Froese et al., 2016; Lazarova and Cerdin, 2007; Pucik et al., 2023; Reiche, 2009). In fact, talent retention is one of the most challenging issues for multinational companies in the global market, as companies strive to find strategies to retain their best employees and thus, maintain their competitive advantage (Tlaiss et al., 2017).

As a result, multinational corporations should pay attention not only to developing job skills and competencies, but also to fostering a sense of engagement in their employees. In fact, when employees are committed to the organisation and satisfied with their jobs, they create a sense of belonging to the organisation and experience the workplace positively (Pucik et al., 2023; Stor, 2022). For this reason, the creation of employee work engagement is closely linked to the international strategic goals of the company and transversal to various HRM activities (Stor, 2022). In a study of ten MNCs, Hooi (2021) demonstrated that employee engagement is positively related to organisational

performance. In fact, when employees are engaged in their work, they turn out to be productive and motivated and therefore generate higher results for the company (Stor, 2022). This means that multinational corporations that are able to create high levels of employee engagement are the ones that perform better and maintain their competitiveness (Pucik et al., 2023).

Over the past three decades, scholars have shown interest in studying the concept of work engagement (Bakker, 2022; Bakker et al., 2011). Initially, it was mainly studied in psychology, while recently it has gained attention also to fields like consultancy, organisational behaviour, HR, and management (Boccoli et al., 2023, p. 78). However, this heterogeneity has led to an unreach consensus about its meaning (Bakker and Leiter, 2010, p. 11). In fact, in literature there are several definitions of this concept, which are both contrasting and overlapping (Saks and Gruman, 2014). This creates confusion in research, as studies may adhere to opposite views of engagement, so the concept is unclear both among scholars and practitioners (Macey and Schneider, 2008). The following are the post-popular theories which are still considered to be valid, and which are cited in the most recent research. (e.g. Bakker, 2022; Bakker et al., 2023; Boccoli et al., 2023; Radic et. al, 2020; Rahmadani and Schaufeli, 2022).

The first conceptualisation of work engagement appears in literature in 1990, with Kahn's article. The main premise is that people have different dimensions of themselves, which they use according to the context. So, the degree to which people are physically, cognitively, and emotionally involved in their work role, has implication to their work experience (Kahn, 1990, p. 692; Knight et al., 2017). In detail, the conceptual framework of the article is based on the notions of personal engagement and disengagement, which are the extremes of people's behaviour. According to Kahn (1990, p. 700) personal engagement is the expression of the preferred part of the individual, while personal disengagement is the withdrawal of that part. Specifically, when people decide whether to engage themselves or not into their work role, they are involved in three psychological conditions: meaningfulness, safety and availability (Kahn, 1990, p. 703). As a result,

engaged employees are the ones who feel rewarded for their performances, who can trust the work environment and have physical, emotional, and psychological resources necessary for the job. This means that people put effort in their tasks, because they identify into their job role (Bakker and Leiter, 2010, p. 12).

Schaufeli et al. (2002) proposed a different point of view, and identified work engagement as the direct opposite to burnout, while being an independent construct. This theory is the most popular in literature, as both psychology and management scholars have used it as main reference (Boccoli et al., 2023; Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020). In detail, Schaufeli et al. (2002, p. 74) define work engagement as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigor, dedication, and absorption”. Vigor refers to the development of high levels of energy and mental resilience, willingness to put effort in the job, and persistence through difficulties (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Dedication occurs when the worker is involved in the role, so feels a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Absorption is characterised by full concentration and inclination to the work, even if time passes quickly, and there are difficulties in separating from work (Schaufeli et al., 2002, pp. 74, 75). Work engagement and burnout have inverse dimensions, so “vigor” and “dedication” are opposite to “exhaustion” and “cynicism” (Bakker et al., 2008). In particular, “vigor” and “exhaustion” are the extreme variables that measure employees’ “energy”, while “dedication” and “cynicism” refer to employees’ “identification” (González-Romá et al., 2006). As a result, employees experiencing work engagement have high levels of energy and solid identification in their work, while in the opposite situation they suffer of burnout (Demerouti and Bakker, 2008). Under this perspective engagement is a persistent affective-cognitive state, which is independent to burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

All these theories share common and contrasting points. In general, scholars compare the ones of Kahn (1990) and Schaufeli et al. (2002), as they are the most popular in the field (e.g. Bakker, 2022; Bakker et al., 2023; Boccoli et al., 2023; Radic et. al, 2020; Schaufeli, 2012). Both agree that work engagement is characterised by behavioural, energetic,

and emotional components (Schaufeli, 2012). However, Schaufeli et al. (2002) consider it as a persistent affective-cognitive state, in contrast to Kahn (1990) that describes it as a momentary behaviour. Moreover, Schaufeli et al. (2002) consider it as part of the work activity, in contrast Kahn (1990) that explains it as part of employee's work role. Besides, theories interpret differently the relationship between work engagement and burnout. In particular, while Kahn (1990) does not address burnout, Schaufeli et al. (2002) consider work engagement as its direct opposite.

Consequently, even if there is no consensus about the definition of employee work engagement, theories share common points that can help the research. In fact, most all of them agrees to the fact that work engagement is guided by positive feelings (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Moreover, there is agreement that dimensions of engagement are related to emotions, energy, and behaviours. It is also stated that engagement is connected to a role or to a job (Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli, 2012). Hence, despite the conceptual differences it is still possible to understand and measure work engagement and compare results of different studies. This can be done through the support of different models, among which the most popular is the Job demands resources model (JD-R) (Boccoli et al., 2023; Schaufeli, 2012).

JD-R is based on the definition of work engagement proposed by Schaufeli et al. (2002) and the main assumption underneath it is that, despite each occupation may have its own characteristics and risk factors, these can be classified into two broad categories: job demands and job resources (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands are those aspects of the job which require effort, so are associated with psychological costs (Demerouti et al., 2001). On the other hand, job resources are the parts of the job that provide motivation, so are functional in achievement of work goals, reduction of job demands and able to stimulate personal growth and learning (Bakker et al., 2023; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Specifically, for an MNC employee job demands could be related to adapting to a culturally complex work setting or to different global or local professional practises. Besides, job resources may be provided by a stimulating

work environment, where people can grow and gain further skills and competences, by going abroad or working with international colleagues.

The latest version of the JD-R model also takes into account factors other than job demands and resources (Bakker et al., 2023). For example, it has been recognised that personal resources can play a similar role to job resources (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). These are positive beliefs that people have about their ability to cope with a particular situation, such as optimism or self-efficacy (Bakker et al., 2023). In an international setting, cultural intelligence is an example of a personal resource, as the development of cultural intelligence has been shown to contribute to increased work engagement and performance among MNC employees (Gabel-Shemueli et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2013). As a result, like job resources, personal resources directly promote work engagement and reduce the negative effects of job demands (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017).

However, there are some criticisms of the JD-R model. For instance, Saks and Gruman (2014) argue that, even though the JD-R model states that job resources satisfy employee's basic psychological needs, there are no psychological variables in the framework (Saks and Gruman, 2014). Furthermore, another criticism of the JD-R model is that it is not sufficient by itself to explain the process of work engagement, so it needs to be combined with other theories. In fact, many scholars use the JD-R together with other frameworks (Boccoli et al., 2023) and one of them, is the Self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

SDT proposes that humans have three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Autonomy explains that people need to experience a sense of volition, competence means that they need to feel that their work is effective, while relatedness implies a sense of closeness and friendship with others (Rigby and Ryan, 2018). Research has shown that the satisfaction of these needs promotes well-being and performance (Gagné and Vansteenkiste, 2013). For example, by analysing individual behaviour in a Nordic-European MNC, Dasí et al. (2017) demonstrated that job

autonomy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and participation are factors that enhance knowledge sharing among global units, which enables the creation a positive MNC work environment and supports its business scope. Furthermore, applying SDT in a study of a European multinational engineering company, Potekhina and Blind (2020) found that the opportunity to contribute within the company motivates R&D engineers to develop patents, which is a factor that enhances the competitive advantage of these multinationals.

As a result of extensive research considering such definitions and theories, there is a wide range of factors that influence work engagement and several related outcomes. It should be noted, however, that there is no linear process between antecedents, work engagement and its consequences, as there is mutual influence between all these variables (Bakker et al., 2023). This means that antecedents influence consequences and vice versa, so the distinction between them is not always rigid. The literature identifies several antecedents of employee engagement, but these are not the subject of discussion because this thesis focuses a specific one: leadership. With regard to the consequences, the literature offers different classifications of the same variables. Since authors propose multiple taxonomies (e.g. Bakker et al., 2023; Boccoli et al., 2023; Saks, 2019), in this thesis it has been decided to follow the classification of Boccoli et al. (2023), which distinguishes between two macro categories of consequences: organisational and individual.

Firstly, work engagement is related to organisational outcomes, as it increases intra and extra role performances and other positive organisational behaviours (Boccoli et al., 2023). Intra-role performances are the most popular consequence (Borst et al., 2020; Gutermann et al., 2017; Zhong et al., 2016), as there is high correlation between company's initiatives enhancing employee engagement, and MNCs' performance results (Stor, 2022). Hooi (2021) conducted a research on the managerial staff of ten MNCs, finding out that leveraging on employee engagement is fundamental to reach superior company performances. Specifically, Xanthopoulou et al. (2009), demonstrated that employees engaged in their daily task, predict daily and future financial returns. This was

also confirmed by Stor (2022), which concluded that employee engagement directly affects the MNCs results in finance. However, the impact is not only at a financial level, as work engagement is able to increase also customers' loyalty and satisfaction (Harter et al., 2002; Salanova et al., 2005). This means that engaged employees' better performances, are correlated with MNCs' profitability and competitive advantage.

Engaged employees also increase extra role performance, which are voluntary positive behaviours related to the workplace, and show an overall positive attitude towards the organisation (Boccoli et al., 2023). This means that they are open to new experiences at work and engage in innovative work and creative behaviours (Bakker et al., 2023; Kong and Li, 2018). This kind of mindset supports the innovation of MNC subsidiaries and thus the creation and maintenance of the company's competitive advantage in the international market (Michailova and Zhan, 2015). Additionally, these employees create a personal sense of responsibility and are interested in representing the organisation in a positive way (Hager, 2018). In general, employees reciprocate positive treatment within the organisation by developing organisational commitment (Presbitero et al., 2019). Specifically, MNCs work with employees from different countries, so they need to ensure that all employees are treated fairly, regardless of their location (Presbitero et al., 2019). In this process, engaged employees are an important resource for MNCs, because their positive behaviour stimulates their colleagues to create a sense of belonging to the company (Presbitero et al., 2019). The main consequence is the reduction of turnover intentions among MNC employees (Hitotsuyanagi-Hansel et al., 2016; Presbitero et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2016).

Work engagement has positive implications also on individuals' professional and private lives. In fact, engaged employees demonstrate to be satisfied about their job (Boccoli et al., 2023; Mazzetti et al., 2023). Job satisfaction is a strategic factor for MNCs, because is a predictor of organisational performance, meaning that satisfied employees usually perform better (Prahaladaiah, 2023). Additionally, it is one of the elements reducing employees' intention to leave the company (Allen et al., 2010; Presbitero et al., 2019; Tlaiss

et al., 2017). In fact, this impacts on employees' occupational growth, because if they feel engaged, then want to progress in their career (Bakker, 2022) and have a positive perception about that (Ng and Feldman, 2014). This was confirmed by a study conducted on Finnish employees, which demonstrated that work engagement positively predicts future wages and probability of rising in occupational rankings (Hakanen et al., 2021).

Extending to private lives, work engagement is related with life satisfaction (Shimazu and Schaufeli, 2009), better family dimension (Aw et al., 2021; Saks, 2019; Shimazu et al., 2020) and physical health (Bakker et al., 2011; Shimazu et al., 2020; Shimazu and Schaufeli, 2009). According to Schaufeli (2021) this is because engaged employees are aware of their limits and value their private life. As a result, engaged workers are able to maintain a better work-life balance, which is also one of the factors that decreases intention to leave within international workers (Giauque et al., 2019). In fact, MNCs employees, in particular on the ones working abroad, may be unable to adjust to the local work-life culture, which would lead to perceived professional dissatisfaction (Bader et al., 2018). As a result, as highlighted in a study on millennials multinational employees, good and flexible work-life balance is a driver that enables MNCs to improve retention staff rates and new talent attraction (Wen et al., 2018).

However, despite numerous studies on the positive outcomes of work engagement, there is also a dark side. Bakker et al. (2011) suggested that there must be a limit to engagement, which means that when employees become overly involved in their activities, they can experience negative consequences such as working overtime, underestimating time, unrealistic optimism, frustration, and conflict with family. In other words, excessive engagement can lead to workaholism, where people work so obsessively that their increased effort at work leads to negative consequences (Shimazu et al., 2015).

To summarise the whole discussion, MNCs rely on employees as a strategic factor to support their operations and maintain their competitive advantage. However, as they operate in an international environment, these companies face different human

resource challenges, because they have to work in different cultures and adapt to different contexts (Cavusgil et al., 2020; Pucik et al., 2023). In this process, MNCs face global competition, which means that they strive to attract and retain the best talents (Pucik et al., 2023; Tlaiss et al., 2017). Therefore, to encourage highly skilled employees to stay in the organisation and support its profitability with high performances and innovative working, organisations need to foster a sense of work engagement among their employees. Although there is no clear definition of employee work engagement, the most common theories agree that it is a psychological state characterised by positive emotions, behaviours, and a sense of energy (Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli, 2012). The job demands resource model (Demerouti et al., 2001) is the most popular framework used to study work engagement, but some authors claim that it needs to be integrated with other theories such as the Self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Extensive research has identified numerous drivers and consequences of work engagement that are relevant to retaining top talent and high performances in MNCs. In fact, work engagement has several outcomes, mostly related to organisational goals, which means that engaged employees directly support the performances and growth of MNCs by performing better in their jobs (Borst et al., 2020; Hooi, 2021; Neuber et al., 2022; Stor, 2022). These are also driven by the creation of organisational commitment and innovative behaviours (Bakker et al., 2023; Hager, 2018; Kong and Li, 2018; Saks, 2019). Besides, there work engagement has positive outcomes on an individual level. In fact, engaged employees are more satisfied with their work and personal lives (Boccoli et al., 2023; Shimazu and Schaufeli, 2009), and are therefore more likely to be successful in their careers (Bakker, 2022; Hakanen et al., 2021) and have a good work-life balance (Schaufeli, 2021).

## **2.2 Leadership as a driver of engagement in multinational corporations**

This chapter illustrates the relationship between leadership and work engagement. It begins with a general description of the concepts of leadership and leaders, followed by

an overview of the most common leadership styles that impact on work engagement. Then, the positive leadership model is presented, which summarises the joint effect of different positive leadership styles on employee engagement, and it is discussed in the light of the MNC context. Finally, the section analyses the relationship between leaders and followers, specifically addressing how it can be relevant in a multinational context to promote employee engagement.

Leadership is an ambiguous concept, because each author interprets it according to their own perspective. Stogdill (1974, p. 259) claimed that “there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept”. In fact, leadership has been conceptualised in terms of various aspects, like traits, behaviours, power influence or relational interaction (Bratton, 2023; Yukl and Gardner, 2020). This means that each author, describes a different dimension of leadership (Bratton, 2023), so in this thesis it has been decided to adhere to the description proposed by Yukl and Gardner (2020, p. 26).

*Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives.*

Most of authors agree that leadership is distriected from management. These are considered two separate roles, because there may be leaders that are not managers, for example informal leaders, and managers that are not leaders, because they do not have subordinates (Yukl and Gardner, 2020). Bennis (2009) summarised this idea in the quote “managers do things right, leaders do the right things”. In fact, previous literature has found several aspects that distinguish the two positions, so summarizing Bratton’s (2023) discussion about the role of leaders, it can be stated that the leader is the one which establishes, models, and communicates direction, aligns others with that, and emotionally motivates, empowers, and inspires them to make it happen despite obstacles. On a general level this means that the leader is capable of influencing others (Bratton, 2023).

Despite the complexity behind the concepts, makes it impossible to create a unique shared definition of “leader” and “leadership” (Manning and Robertson, 2022), it has been decided to provide some examples, in order to clarify their meaning in the current thesis. These are broad definitions, because they include simultaneously diverse the aspects, like for instance both direct and indirect influence (Yukl and Gardner, 2020). In any case, it should be noted that, despite there is a difference between the concepts of leaders and managers, this thesis uses them as synonyms, similarly to the approach followed by Yukl and Gardner (2020) in their book. This is based on the idea that in real life the two constructs usually overlap, because people that occupy managing positions, are also expected to perform as leaders (Yukl and Gardner, 2020).

Indeed, most of the research on this topic focuses on leadership styles, which are the expression of a set of different leaders’ attitudes and behaviours (Anderson and Sun, 2017). As a result, it is possible to identify several styles of leadership (Bratton, 2023), although traditionally the literature has distinguished between two main ones: transformational and transactional. Recently, however, researchers have identified other styles, expanding the taxonomies with new concepts such as ethical, authentic, servant and engaging leadership (Avolio et al., 2009; Rahmadani and Schaufeli, 2022).

Specifically, the literature has shown how leaders with certain leadership styles are able to promote work engagement. Indeed, leadership is considered one of the main drivers of employees’ engagement. Zahari and Kaliannan (2023) claim that the characteristics and behaviours of leaders influence employees in achieving organisational goals. In particular, in an international setting, global leaders play a pivotal role in connecting people from different countries and facilitating effective collaboration between them (Muzondiwa et al., 2022; Rexhepi et al., 2017). Consequently, scholars analysing the relationship between work engagement and leadership have examined it in terms of leadership styles (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020), so the most popular ones are mentioned below.

Transformational leadership is the style most commonly related to work engagement (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020), because it focuses on inspiring and transforming followers (Yukl and Gardner, 2020). According to Bass and Avolio (1994) there are four components of transformational leadership: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration. This means that these leaders support, challenge and inspire their followers, in order to make them committed to the organisation (Blomme et al., 2015). As a result, transformational leaders promote employees' engagement by enhancing a series of positive attitudes like for example optimism, responsibility, meaningfulness, and innovative behaviour (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015).

In addition, scholars have analysed the relationship between other types of leadership styles and engagement, for example authentic and servant leadership (e.g. Rahal and Farmanesh, 2022; Ruiz Moreno et al., 2021; Winton et al., 2022). Authentic leadership is defined as a pattern of leader behaviours promoting positive psychological capacities, ethical climate, and self-development (Walumbwa et al., 2008). This is based of four main characteristics: self-awareness, internalised moral perspective, balanced processing of information and relational transparency (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Besides, servant leadership is grounded on the idea that leaders need to go beyond their own interest, meaning that their primary role is to help others in reaching their objectives (Greenleaf, 1977; Yukl and Gardner, 2020). Literature has proposed several characteristics of servant leadership (Anderson and Sun, 2017), but according to van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) these can be summarised in three aspects: humility, standing back, and stewardship.

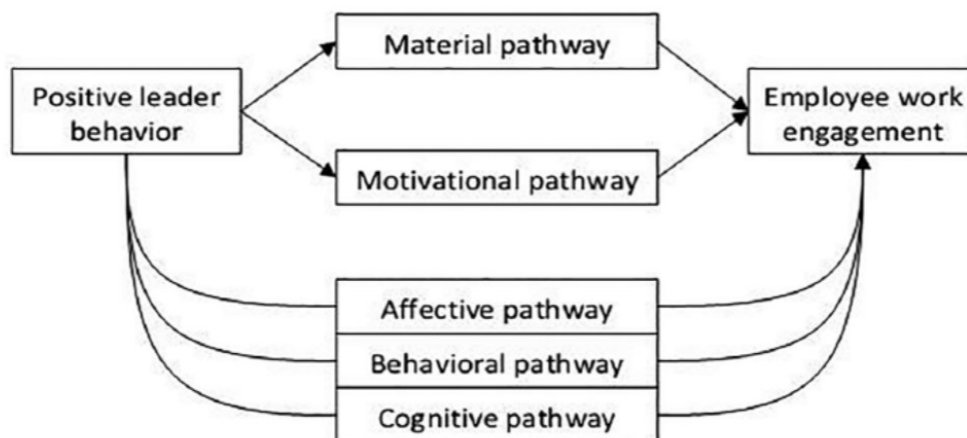
As several studies underlined the pivotal role of leaders in promoting employees' work engagement, recently it has been introduced the specific concept of engaging leadership. In detail, engaging leaders are the ones who facilitate, strengthen, connect, and inspire their employees, in order to foster their work engagement (Schaufeli, 2015). This view is grounded on a combination between Self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000)

and Job-demands resource theory (Bakker et al., 2023). Hence, leaders enhance engagement when they satisfy employees' basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and when they increase job and personal resources and lower demands (Schaufeli, 2015). In general, this means that engaging leaders may promote engagement both directly and indirectly (Schaufeli, 2021). Despite the concept is relatively new, few studies have already demonstrated the positive relationship between employee engagement and engaging leadership (e.g. Nikolova et al., 2019; Rahmadani and Schaufeli, 2022).

In brief, work engagement has been studied in relation to different leadership styles. The most popular is transformational (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020), but scholars have found evidence also in others, like authentic and servant leadership (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015; Ruiz Moreno et al., 2021). However, the existence of several leadership styles also rises criticism, because they tend to overlap. For example, if servant and authentic leadership style are compared to transformational leadership, there is some degree of similarity (Hoch et al., 2018; Panaccio et al., 2015; Winton et al., 2022). This is true not only in their conceptualisation, but also in relation to specific outcomes, in this case work engagement. Consequently, Schaufeli (2021) introduced the concept of engaging leader, in order to give a unique categorisation to the effect of leadership on employee engagement. However, in practice this resulted in the introduction of a new leadership style, as later, Rahmadani and Schaufeli (2022) analysed the relationship between transformational and engaging leadership to work engagement, concluding that despite there is overlap between the two, each one includes its own unique elements and contributes independently work engagement. However, according to Bormann and Rowold (2018) it is necessary to avoid the formulation of new leadership styles, rather literature should focus on clustering them, to clarify their influential process in relation to specific outcomes.

### 2.2.1 Positive leadership model

To overcome redundancy of leadership constructs related to work engagement, Decuyper and Schaufeli (2020) developed a general framework based on “positive leadership”. This is based on Bormann and Rowold’s (2018) idea, that new leadership constructs tend to be similar to existing ones, so this model is aimed to integrate various positive leadership styles, in order to explain their shared effect on work engagement (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020). Specifically, the authors define positive leadership as “all the leadership styles that have been developed with the underlying assumption that they positively influence employee outcomes” (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020, p. 73). The main idea under this conceptualisation is to clearly distinguish between positive and negative outcomes of leadership.



**Figure 1:** Five pathways research model (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020, p. 79)

Drawing upon Bormann and Rowold (2018), they recognise that leadership styles like transformational, servant, authentic, and ethical leadership tend to be similar (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015; Hoch et al., 2018; Walumbwa et al., 2008; Winton et al., 2022). As a result, they propose that even if leadership styles are not identical, they turn into similar leadership behaviours, meaning that all positive leaders have the same effect on employees’ engagement (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020). Based on these premises, they reunited several theories and summarised them in a unique model, where positive leaders influence work engagement both indirectly and directly through five pathways

(Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020). This is coherent with previous research, as in general authors identified both direct and indirect influence, in relation to leadership styles (e.g. Boccoli et al., 2023; Carasco-Saul et al., 2015; Schaufeli, 2021). In particular, the indirect effect is given in two ways, namely the “material pathway” and the “motivational pathway”, while the direct is promoted by three other pathways: “affective pathway”, “behavioural pathway” and “cognitive pathway”.

The “material pathway” is based on the JD-R model (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti et al., 2001), so on the fact a positive balance between demands and resources may increase work engagement, meaning that is necessary to foster job and personal resources to support employees’ motivation (Bakker et al., 2023; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). According to the authors, leaders’ role is to allocate demands and resources, so they propose that “Leaders influence work engagement indirectly through diminishing job demands and enhancing resources” (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020, p. 80). For instance, Lee et al. (2013) in a study on MNC subsidiaries operating in China, found that transformational leadership is positively correlated with international workers adjustment and performance at work. According to their research, employees that are given support by their leaders, adapt more easily to the new culture and perform better in foreign assignments (Lee et al., 2013). In fact, leaders provide organisational resources, and specifically support employees working in a multinational environment, by encouraging intercultural collaboration and helping to cope with cultural diversity (Hundschell et al., 2022). As a result, leaders enhance the creation of employee engagement in a multinational context, and consequently, support organisational success (Hundschell et al., 2022).

Secondly, the “motivational pathway” pathway is based on the SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2000), so on the satisfaction of employees’ basic psychological needs, as source for higher engagement (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020). This has been confirmed by several studies, which have taken into consideration the mediating effect of one or more needs in relation to leadership styles (e.g. Breevaart et al., 2014; Panaccio et al., 2015). For example, in a study of servant leaders in merger processes, Jorge Correia de Sousa and

van Dierendonck (2014) showed that leaders who address individual psychological needs are able to maintain employees' motivation and organisational identification, and in turn support their adaptation to change (Jorge Correia de Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014). In particular, through vision, transparency and empowerment, these leaders foster a sense of engagement, that is effective in highly uncertain situations. As a result, for multinational companies, leadership is a strategic tool to create employee engagement in an international and uncertain context (Jorge Correia de Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014). Another evidence of the “motivational pathway” can be drawn from van Tuin et al. (2020), that through research on engineering MNCs, found out that engaging leadership is significantly correlated with the positive outcomes of engagement. This is because, according to the authors, engaging leaders are able to recognise and support employees' basic needs, particularly autonomy (van Tuin et al., 2020). In fact, when people feel autonomous, they become more open and resilient (van Tuin et al., 2020), attributes that enable to successfully navigate an international work environment. This means that when a leader support employees' needs, then promotes freedom and engagement, and in this way also contributes to decrease adverse work outcomes in a multinational context (van Tuin et al., 2020).

Moving towards the direct influential process, first there is the “affective pathway”. This is based on emotional contagion, which is people's tendency to converge emotionally to other individuals, by automatically imitate their expressions, voice, positions and movements (Hatfield et al., 1993). As leaders are highly visible, compared to other individuals, it is presumed that if they show positive emotions and behaviours, then they can directly influence follower engagement through emotional contagion (Decuypere and Schaufeli, 2020). This idea is supported by Butt et al. (2019), who conducted two independent studies among leaders and employees of two multinational companies and showed that leaders have a strong influence on followers' work passion due to their authority. In fact, leaders who demonstrate passion themselves are also able to motivate their followers, who respond empathically by demonstrating work passion as well (Butt et al., 2019).

Direct influence is also described in the “behavioural pathway”. This grounded on Social learning theory (SLT), so on the fact that individuals learn by imitating others who perceive as role models (Bandura, 1977). In literature this process has been related mainly to transformational leadership (Blomme et al., 2015; Carasco-Saul et al., 2015). Based on that, Decuyper and Schaufeli (2020) propose that when leaders are engaged themselves, they could be perceived as examples to replicate, and in this way directly influence subordinates’ engagement. On a general level, when leaders work to fulfil stakeholders’ interests, they inspire other to act similarly (Lythreatis et al., 2021), and therefore increase employees’ wellbeing and commitment to organisational goals (Panaccio et al., 2015). Such aspects are a challenge in a multinational context, which is characterised by cultural diversity and high uncertainty. However, when leaders are focused on individual needs, they remain effective across cultures and situations (Lythreatis et al., 2021; Van Dierendonck et al., 2017). Palalic and Ait Sidi Mhamed (2020) found out that MNCs employees who perceive their managers as motivational and inspirational, are more likely to be committed to the organisation and share its values. Additionally, they demonstrated that such leaders create a supportive working environment, where employees feel safe, reassured, identified, and therefore engaged in their work. As a consequence, engaged employees contribute MNCs organisational success with job performance, attendance, and lower turnover (Palalic and Ait Sidi Mhamed, 2020).

Lastly, the “cognitive pathway” draws upon Social exchange theory (SET), which states that employees and leaders are involved in an exchange relationship, meaning that they are interdependent to each other as they expect reciprocal commitment and support (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Shore et al., 2006). This idea is a modern and dynamic approach to work engagement, as up to date research proposes to consider it as a social construct based on interaction (Boccoli et al., 2023). Consequently, it is assumed that when leaders show positive behaviours and engagement, then followers are likely to respond with a reciprocal behaviour, so tend to be more engaged too (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020). For instance, through a study on the role of authentic leaders within American multinational enterprises, Gibbon (2023) found out that authentic leadership

behaviours foster trust and job satisfaction among MNCs employees (Gibbon, 2023). This means that when leaders are open and transparent to their subordinates, then employees respond accordingly. Consequently, this creates a positive working environment where MNCs employees have trust, faith and are satisfied about their organisation (Gibbon, 2023), which directly promotes their engagement (Winton et al., 2022), and therefore supports organisational success of multinational enterprises.

To sum up, the “positive leadership model” is aimed to summarise the literature on the impact of leadership on work engagement into a unique framework. This comprises two indirect and a direct process, and all of these are based on specific theoretical foundations (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020). It may be argued that the idea behind this model and its outcomes, is similar to what is stated in engaging leadership theory (Schaufeli, 2015). On a certain level this is true, because both are based on the willingness to narrow the literature and give a unique explanation of how leaders engage employees. However, while engaging leadership has become a leadership style, this model has not developed any new style, but explained joint mechanisms among different leadership styles. This means that the model also incorporates the concept of engaging leadership and generalises its outcomes among other styles. In fact, despite their conceptual differences, all positive styles of leadership are somehow able to engage multinational employees, by inspiring, motivating and supporting their needs (Gibbon, 2023; Jorge Correia de Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014; Lee et al., 2013; Palalic and Ait Sidi Mhamed, 2020; van Tuin et al., 2020). In this way leaders contribute to create a positive workplace, where employees are free to express, proactive and innovative towards their job, which turns into better performances and MNCs success.

### **2.2.1 Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory**

Research recognises the existence of an influential relationship between leaders and followers. In the positive leadership model, this element is justified by SET (Shore et al., 2006), which is a general theory. However, in leadership literature, there is a more

specific model that focuses on the quality of the relationship between leaders and followers: the Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). LMX claims that followers are different, so leaders establish a unique relationship with every subordinate, which can be high or low quality (Bratton, 2023; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). According to Yukl and Gardner (2020), this is created gradually, and if there is reciprocal commitment, evolves into loyalty and shared support.

In detail, leaders develop high-quality relationships with a limited number of trusted subordinates, whereas they have a lower-quality exchange with other team members (Hoyt and Goethals, 2009; Yukl and Gardner, 2020). High-quality relations are characterised by mutual obligations and reciprocity (Gutermann et al., 2017), meaning that if the leader fosters outcomes that are desirable for the follower, then the subordinate will behave accordingly (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020; Yukl and Gardner, 2020). Hence, if the superior assigns interesting tasks, delegates, shares information and supports employee's career, the latter is willing to work harder and be engaged in his job (Yukl and Gardner, 2020). Conversely, lower exchange relationships require less mutual influence and are limited to employee and leader's job description, meaning that subordinates comply only formal requirements of their jobs and receive just the basic remuneration (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Yukl and Gardner, 2020).

Within a multinational context, the quality of the leader-member relationship has a pivotal role in supporting the strategy. As MNCs are complex organisations and may have several subsidiaries, local managers have the responsibility to implement and communicate the strategy among employees. In this context, high quality LMX facilitates the information flow from headquarters to subsidiaries, because it enables the alignment between individual and MNCs' goals (Jiang et al., 2021; Maley and Kiessling, 2021). This supports knowledge sharing between MNC employees, which in turn creates a positive atmosphere that enhances individual and team performances, and therefore organisational results (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Maley and Kiessling, 2021). Additionally, the different quality of the interactions between leaders and each of their followers, results in

differences in employees' engagement, and so performances (Jain et al., 2014). This means that leaders need to tailor leader-member relationships, based on each subordinate's unique needs, as they impact on how strategies are perceived, and therefore how employees perform (Jain et al., 2014; Pichler et al., 2019).

However, forming high quality LMX in this context is challenging. In general, in MNCs there are multicultural teams, so leaders must deal with employees coming from different countries. In these cases, it has been demonstrated that subordinates usually have higher quality relationship with leaders with the same or similar culture (Pichler et al., 2019). This means that in international context, the quality of LMX relationships is influenced by further elements, like culture and diversity. As a result, multinational organisations need to create a strong organisational culture and allocate carefully supervisors within specific groups, in order to support diversity, socialisation and company commitment (Pichler et al., 2019). In fact, when international employees are in an interactive working environment, they develop good relationships with colleagues and supervisors, and therefore adjust easier to diversity, and show engagement in the job (Qomariyah et al., 2022; Quttainah and Said, 2021).

Specifically, leader-follower relationships have been demonstrated to impact work engagement in various ways. This is described by Decuyper and Schaufeli (2020) in the "cognitive pathway" of their model, which is grounded on social exchange (Shore et al., 2006). This means that the LMX relationships can be interpreted as an interdependence and a reciprocal exchange of benefits like favours, work or support (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020; Wagner and Koob, 2022). Under this perspective, high quality LMX can directly influence employees' work engagement (Christian et al., 2011; Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020). For example, in a study of international employees working in MNC subsidiaries, Liu and Ipe (2010) show that LMX is a predictor of employee commitment, which in turn promotes positive work-related outcomes (Nguyen et al., 2015). This means that employees respond to leaders' support and concern for their well-being by developing engagement, which is reflected in lower absenteeism and turnover

intentions, and thus higher trust and retention within the MNC (Liu and Ipe, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2015). This idea is also supported by Khan and Malik (2017), who claim that LMX is positively related to work engagement, which in turn fosters employees' positive extra-role behaviours, like organisational citizenship and innovative working. According to the authors, good exchange with leaders, promotes energy and mental resilience among employees, which keep engagement in their work (Khan and Malik, 2017). In this way, people improve their innovativeness and creativity, and consequently support company's success in a multinational context.

Moreover, most of the research demonstrated that LMX has an indirect impact on engagement. High quality relationships can foster personal and job resources (Radstaak and Hennes, 2017; Wagner and Koob, 2022), which according to the JD-R theory increase work engagement (Bakker et al., 2023). Presbitero (2020) found that the interaction between leaders and employees, impacts their cultural intelligence, which in a multinational context is a personal resource, that influences task performances. Additionally, previous research on positive leadership styles, has interpreted high quality LMX as a moderating variable between leadership and its outcomes. Gill and Caza (2018) in a study on authentic leadership in a multinational company, show that when there is high quality interaction between leaders and followers, there is positive response to leaders. In fact, Butt et al. (2019) in their research on leaders' influence on subordinates' work passion, state that when there is a high-quality relationship between the two, leaders' crossover effect on subordinates' work passion is stronger. This means that the influence of positive leadership on work engagement is more effective when there is high quality relationship between leaders and followers (Naeem et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023).

Likewise, high quality LMX fosters further elements like trust, socialisation, constructive feedback, proactiveness, innovative working, safe working environment and commitment to the others, which are all factors enhancing employee engagement. In a study on MNC employees in China, Hui et al. (2019) demonstrated when leaders are perceived as

helpful, caring and honest, then employees develop trust in them, and therefore show engagement in their work. This means that a good relationship between leaders and employees contributes to the creation of engagement through a positive workplace environment, which promotes open communication, creativity, and innovation culture (Hui et al., 2019). This idea is supported also by Zuberi and Khattak (2021), who proved that LMX increases innovative working behaviour among MNC employees. Specifically, the authors claim that when there is high quality LMX, then employees have good social connection with leaders, which provide significant tasks and constructive feedback. Consequently, employees appear to be innovatively engaged in their job (Zuberi and Khattak, 2021). In fact, leaders engage their employees by stimulating their skills, learning and critical thinking, and therefore encouraging their innovative working. As a result, engaged employees bring novel ideas to the organisation, demonstrate proactivity and positive reaction to changes, contributing to maintain competitiveness in international and fast changing markets, and so ultimately, multinational companies' success (Hui et al., 2019; Zuberi and Khattak, 2021).

However, the existence of a relationship between leaders and followers results in a set of reciprocal expectations. In fact, leaders have ideal prototypes of followers (implicit followership theories, IFTs) (Sy, 2010), while also followers have beliefs about desirable leaders' (implicit leadership theories, ILTs) (Eden and Leviatan, 1975). As a result, individuals' perceptions determine both the evaluation of a leader's behaviour, and followers' reaction to it (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). On a general level, congruence of expectations, both for leaders and followers, influences the perceptions of the quality of LMX (Coyle and Foti, 2015; Lord et al., 2020). Through their study on authentic leadership in a multinational company, Gill and Caza (2018) show that followers' perception of leaders' behaviour predicts the quality of the social exchange between the two. As a result, the same leaders' behaviours are perceived differently by each of their followers and thus have different consequences. Hence, when followers understand positive expectations from leaders, they become more engaged (Veestraeten et al., 2021). This means that ideal prototypes and mutual expectations influence behaviour of both

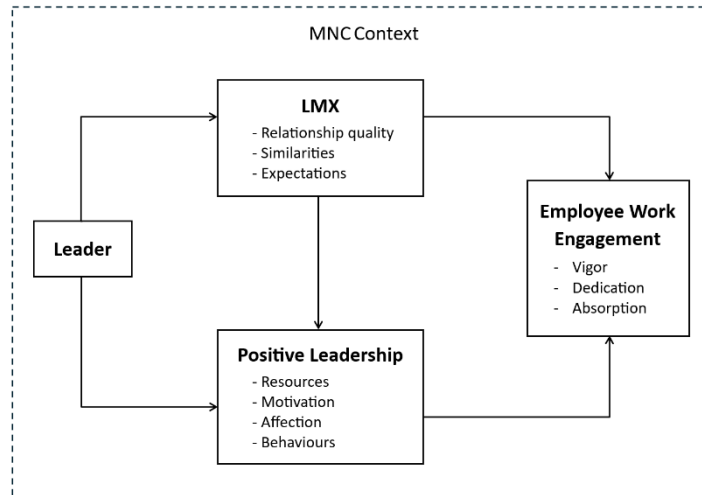
leaders and followers, which in turn affects their relationship and ultimately employee engagement.

In summary, the quality of the leader-follower relationship is an influential element of employee engagement and its outcomes in multinational contexts. The literature has found both direct and indirect effects of LMX on work engagement resources (Christian et al., 2011; Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020; Radstaak and Hennes, 2017; Wagner and Koob, 2022). When applied to specific leadership styles, LMX is also a moderating variable between positive leadership and employee engagement (Naeem et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023). Specifically, high quality of LMX relationships in multinational contexts foster trust, open communication, knowledge sharing, collaboration, innovative working, and other personal and job resources, which in turn predict employee engagement (Khan and Malik, 2017; Maley and Kiessling, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2015; Presbitero, 2020; Zuberi and Khattak, 2021). However, this dyadic relationship is also influenced by mutual expectations towards it, which change the individual's perception of the LMX (Coyle and Foti, 2015; Gill and Caza, 2018; Lord et al., 2020), and therefore the creation of engagement (Vestraeten et al., 2021). On the other hand, LMX construct has been criticised for being unclear and poorly defined (Sheer, 2015) and that, although it considers a dyadic relationship, research on it has been mainly quantitative, and therefore unable to explain how relationships are built (Wilson, 2023, p. 87). As a result, by conducting a qualitative study, Wilson (2023) was able to extend LMX theory to include additional dimensions and formulate a new construct called Dyadic Relationship Quality (DRQ).

### **2.3 Summary of theoretical framework**

The main idea of the thesis is to understand how leaders influence employees' work engagement in MNCs. Specifically, the research aims to understand how MNCs' leaders and employees perceive work engagement, and thus the effect of positive leadership and leader-follower relationships (LMX) in promoting employee engagement. In doing so, the study follows the approach proposed by Boccoli et al. (2023), which interprets

work engagement as a social interaction. Specifically, in this case, work engagement is built within the interaction of managers with their employees. Figure 2 below summarises the theoretical framework of the thesis.



**Figure 2:** Theoretical framework of the thesis

This theoretical chapter begins by describing the relevance and implications of employee engagement in a multinational context. It explains the reason why multinational companies should promote employee engagement, along with a theoretical perspective of the construct. However, as there are no clear definitions of work engagement, one of the objectives of the study is to investigate how the concept is perceived in practice, both by leaders and followers. The idea is to understand whether there is a common meaning of the construct or whether each actor interprets it differently. Since the literature offers a wide range of definitions, the one proposed by Schaufeli et al. (2002) is used as a preliminary guide for the research. As a recall, the authors interpret work engagement as a permanent state, characterised by three dimensions: vigor, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Moreover, in this chapter of the thesis it is also provided a comprehensive explanation of organisational and individual consequences of work engagement in a multinational context. Although not directly examined in the current research, the author found relevant to address them in order to clarify how far work engagement affects MNC employees and therefore why it is an important driver for MNCs' successful performance in the international market.

The second part of the literature review is dedicated to the specific role of leaders as drivers of employee work engagement in multinational contexts. The first theoretical perspective of the review focuses on positive leadership. In fact, the thesis is in line with the idea of Bormann and Rowold's (2018), who state that the literature is already saturated with leadership styles, so the formulation of new ones should be avoided. Therefore, Decuyper and Schaufeli's (2020) model is used as main reference, as it integrates different leadership styles into the unique concept of "positive leadership" and explains their common effect on employee engagement. Ultimately, the aim is to understand which leaders' attitudes, actions, behaviours and emotions promote employees' engagement.

According to this review, positive leaders support the engagement of employees working in multinational companies in different ways. First of all, by providing resources that encourage adaptation and collaboration (Hundschell et al., 2022). In addition, leaders support the satisfaction of employees' psychological needs (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020; Ryan and Deci, 2000), which in turn promotes engagement through motivation and organisational identification, thereby reducing negative work outcomes and supporting adaptation to change in uncertain contexts (Jorge Correia de Sousa and van Dierendonck, 2014; van Tuin et al., 2020). Furthermore, leaders' positive emotions and behaviours, directly influence followers' engagement through emotional contagion and role modelling (Bandura, 1977; Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020; Hatfield et al., 1993). Indeed, by being inspirational, open and transparent to their subordinates, positive leaders create a work environment that fosters trust, identification and satisfaction among MNC employees (Gibbon, 2023; Palalic and Ait Sidi Mhamed, 2020). In particular, when leaders focus on individual needs, they remain effective despite the diversity and complexity of the multinational context (Lythreatis et al., 2021; Van Dierendonck et al., 2017).

Furthermore, given the initial premise that work engagement results from the interaction between leaders and employees, the thesis is based on the existence of an exchange relationship between the two. Consequently, the second theoretical perspective of the

discussion is the LMX theory (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). This is related to the “cognitive pathway” of the positive leadership model (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020), which is based on SET (Shore et al., 2006) that is a general theory, whereas LMX is specifically grounded in the leadership context. Alternatively, the thesis could refer to the DRQ model (Wilson, 2023), but as it has already been developed, it has not yet been validated, whereas there is already an extensive literature in support of LMX. Therefore, one of the aims of this research is to understand how the leader-follower relationship affects employee engagement in MNCs.

Consistent with the literature, LMX has both a direct and indirect impact on employees' engagement. Indeed, good interactions with leaders promote factors such as energy, mental resilience, trust, socialisation, constructive feedback, proactiveness and innovative work among MNC employees, who respond to leaders' support and concern for their well-being by developing engagement to their work (Khan and Malik, 2017; Liu and Ipe, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2015; Radstaak and Hennes, 2017; Wagner and Koob, 2022). Furthermore, previous research on positive leadership styles confirms that when there is a high-quality interaction between leaders and followers, there is a positive response to leaders (Gill and Caza, 2018). This means that the influence of positive leadership on work engagement is more effective when there is a high-quality relationship between leaders and followers (Naeem et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023). As a result, perceived high quality LMX relationships are a predictor of work engagement in MNCs, because they support information flow and knowledge sharing among MNC employees, which in turn create a positive atmosphere that enhances high performances, and thus company's success (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2021; Maley and Kiessling, 2021).

### **3 Research methodology**

This chapter is dedicated to the description of the research methodology. According to Saunders et al. (2019) the formulation of the research methodology involves a number of steps, so researchers need to choose the philosophy, approach, strategy, method, time horizon, techniques and procedures for data analysis. In addition, researchers should also think about the quality of their data and findings (Saunders et al., 2019). In this section, all the steps and decisions of the research are analysed and the rationale behind them is explained. The structure of the discussion follows exactly the steps of the research onion proposed by Saunders et al. (2019). In addition, the authors provide a detailed description of the process of data collection and analysis. The last part is dedicated to the quality of the research.

#### **3.1 Research philosophy and approach**

Saunders et al. (2019, p. 130) describe research philosophy as the development and nature of knowledge. This means that during the study, the researcher needs to make a set of assumptions, about the nature of reality (ontology), the validity and communication of knowledge (epistemology) and the role of values and ethics in the research process (axiology) (Burrell and Morgan, 2017; Saunders et al., 2019). According to Saunders et al. (2019) there are five main philosophies in business and management: positivism, critical realism, pragmatism, postmodernism and interpretivism. This thesis falls under the latter, which recognises that humans are different from physical phenomena, and therefore it is not possible to create generalised laws that apply to everyone, as positivists claim (Saunders et al., 2019).

In fact, interpretivism aims to offer new interpretations of reality and social experiences, by considering multiple perspectives. From an ontological standpoint this means that reality is complex and socially constructed, which is how that Boccoli et al. (2023) explain the nature of work engagement, and the perspective taken by this thesis. Furthermore,

in interpretivist epistemology, knowledge is created through individual perceptions and multiple interpretations (Saunders et al., 2019). In the current research this means that the influence of leadership on employee work engagement, is studied considering both the leaders' and employees' viewpoints, in order to provide wider explanation to the phenomenon. However, considering the axiological perspective, this means that researcher's values and beliefs influence the interpretation of data, so their ability to empathically understand the perspective of others influences the research findings.

Moreover, Saunders et al. (2019) state that researchers should think about their research approach, which is determined by how they reason about their study, that can be either deductively or inductively. In the deductive approach, the researcher draws on existing theory to develop hypotheses to be tested in their study (Saunders et al., 2019). On the contrary, in the inductive approach, the theory comes after the data, which means that the researcher collects data and develops a theory based on it (Saunders et al., 2019). However, Eriksson and Kovalainen, (2016, p. 24) point out that both approaches may be used simultaneously in social research, as it is not always possible to make a clear distinction between them (Saunders et al., 2019).

Hence, it is difficult to label this study as exclusively inductive or deductive, as it involves a combination of both approaches. Some authors refer to the combination between deduction and induction with the term abductive approach (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 155). However, according to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016) research includes different forms of reasoning, so there is no unique approach to that. Therefore, the point of defining a research approach is not to label it as deductive, inductive or abductive, but to clearly explain how deductive and inductive reasoning are applied (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). In this specific case, in line with the deductive approach, the researcher analyses first the existing theory, to gain an overview of the current state of research in the field. However, the thesis does not develop a hypothesis to be tested, but creates a theoretical framework that is used as main guideline for the study. In fact, the research analyses the

problem in detail and tries to extend the existing theory through the analysis of the collected data, which is consistent with the inductive approach.

### **3.2 Research design**

The research design can be defined as “the general plan of how you will go about answering your research questions(s)” (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 173), and its formulation requires making decisions about how to proceed and how to select data (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). However, the design is first guided by the purpose of the research, which is intrinsically contained in the way the research question is formulated. In fact, according to Saunders et al. (2019) studies may fulfil four different purposes, namely: exploratory, descriptive, explanatory or evaluative, or also combination of those. An exploratory study is conducted to gain insights into an unfamiliar problem, so it is mainly driven by “How” and “Why” questions. It is usually used as a first step of research because it is flexible and adaptable to change, and its ultimate aim is to formulate problems more precisely (Swaraj, 2019). A possible extension of an exploratory study is the descriptive study, which precisely defines the characteristics of a given problem or situation that is known by the researcher (Quinlan et al., 2015; Saunders et al., 2019). Descriptive studies, may also be precursors to explanatory studies, which aim to identify cause-and-effect between variables, in order to clarify their relationships (Quinlan et al., 2015; Saunders et al., 2019). Finally, evaluative research is aimed at understanding whether something (e.g. a strategy, policy, initiative, etc.) is able to work effectively.

In line with the approach above described, so the combination of induction and deduction, the purpose of this research is both exploratory and descriptive. Although both leadership and work engagement are two topics that have been widely studied in the literature, this study aims to explore them under the new broad perspective of positive leadership, instead of different distinct leadership styles. In addition, the study aims to provide new insights into the topic from both leaders' and followers' perspectives,

something that is lacking in the literature. In addition, the study is also descriptive, as it aims to provide a more detailed explanation of the phenomenon.

After the purposes have been identified, the first step of the research design is the methodological choice, which can lead to either quantitative or qualitative research (Almeida et al., 2017). However, it is not always possible to distinguish between them unequivocally, so authors explain their difference by considering which type of data they use (Saunders et al., 2019). Quantitative research works with quantifiable data, which meaning derives from numbers (Saunders et al., 2019), and is designed to objectively measure casual relationships between variables in a sample, which are then generalised to whole population (Almeida et al., 2017). On the other hand, qualitative research uses qualitative data, which represent any information that cannot be quantified (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016, p. 83). These explain dynamics, so provide illustrative information about a certain problem, aiming to understand its different dimensions (Almeida et al., 2017).

Given the exploratory and descriptive nature of the research question, qualitative research was chosen for this thesis. In fact, according to Lincoln (2021) qualitative research enables the exploration of complex human experiences in a particular context, which in this case are related to employees' and leaders' perspective about leadership and work engagement in the MNC context. Moreover, as anticipated in the introduction, this study responds to Wilson's (2023, p. 87) call for qualitative studies in leadership research. The majority of business scholars uses quantitative research methods (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016), and this applies also to leadership and work engagement, which research mainly involves the use of questionnaires. However, as the reason for this study is to provide a broader and deeper understanding of the topics, it requires the use of qualitative data. Specifically, these are gathered through interviews as single data collection technique, so the research is identified as a mono method qualitative study (Saunders et al., 2019).

From these considerations, it follows the research strategy, which is the way the researcher answers their research question (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Strategies are associated with qualitative, quantitative or both research methods, although there are often open boundaries between them. According to Saunders et al. (2019) there are six research strategies that are linked to qualitative research methods: case study, narrative inquiry, grounded theory, action research, ethnography, and archival documentary research. The current research strategy is the case study, which is an empirical investigation of a phenomenon in a real-world context (Yin, 2012). Specifically, the case is a bounded entity, so a unit of analysis that could be represented by a person, a group, an organisation or an event. In this thesis several people from three different companies were interviewed for the research, and each of them is considered an independent unit of analysis.

Finally, the ultimate decision involved in the research design is the time horizon. In detail a study can be longitudinal, analysing changes in a phenomenon over a period of time, or cross-sectional, looking at a specific point in time (Saunders et al., 2019). This research is designed to be cross-sectional, as it examines perceptions of leadership and work engagement in a single time frame and does not consider the development of the phenomenon over time.

### **3.3 Research sample, data collection and analysis**

According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016) in qualitative research the main issue is to obtain adequate and rich data rather than to have a sophisticated and representative sample. Specifically, the study is based on the multinational context, so the target sample was leaders and employees of MNCs. In order to give the study more consistency and to open up the possibility of replicability of the findings, the author found it relevant to consider companies operating in similar fields. Then, in order to find patterns, which are independent from the company's culture, the research aimed to address multiple MNCs. To meet the dyadic structure of the analysis, the intention was to collect a sample of one

leader and two subordinates for each of the companies. In addition, to further restrict the sample, and since the study is not based on individual cultural factors, the author approached teams based in Finland. All this given the target sample of the research was represented by a triad of one leader and two employees working in Finland, of three MNCs companies operating in a similar field.

The sample selection process included both purposive and snowball sampling. In purposive sampling, the researcher selects the cases that they find suitable to answer their research question (Saunders et al., 2019). Specifically, the author found the three companies to target, and through their personal network reached out for contacts within them. Initially, the researcher reached out for potential leaders to interview, but not all of those contacted were suitable for the research, because they were not in charge of a team based in Finland. However, those who were contacted provided further contacts of other possible candidates. This process took place between February and March 2024 and in the end three leaders of three MNCs, in charge of three teams based in Finland agreed to participate in the project. Secondly, in order to find the sample of subordinates, snowball sampling was used, where current participants were asked if they could identify other people for the study (Saunders et al., 2019). In detail, each leader was asked to identify two volunteers from their team.

The research technique is the interview, which is a purposeful conversation where the interviewer listens carefully to the interviewee in order to gain insights into the topic of interest (Saunders et al., 2019). There are different types of interviews, and according to Saunders et al. (2019) qualitative studies apply non-standardised interviews, which can be either unstructured or semi-structured. This study uses the latter, which means that there is a set of predefined themes and questions, but the wording and order of these questions may vary in each interview (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). Specifically, the current interview guide (Appendix 1) was designed around the three main themes described in the literature review: work engagement, leadership, and leader-member

exchange, each of which was linked to a set of questions. Moreover, interviews were one-to one, meaning that there was a separate interview with each of the participants.

Semi-structured interviews facilitate the conversation, but also present challenges for the interviewer. On one hand, participants are given more freedom to express their opinions, and therefore new topics are more likely to emerge (Saunders et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant in this study, which is an emotionalist interview study, meaning that it aims to measure participants' perceptions and experiences of the research topics (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). On the other hand, this means that the interviewer should make sure that all topics are covered, while not sticking too much to the designed questions (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). In practice, this means that not all the pre-defined questions were asked directly, but the interviewer used them as a guide to help the interviewee to express their experience about the above-mentioned topics. In addition, the interview guidelines were provided in advance in order to familiarise the interviewees with their questions, and to allow them to talk about them serenely. Sending the questions in advance was also useful for the interviewer, as it clarified the topics to be discussed and ensured that they were all covered.

The interviews took place between the end of April and May 2024, and the sample was slightly different than expected. At first, all the leaders were recontacted to schedule the interviews, and asked to provide the contacts of their team members available to participate in the interviews. Some leaders provided more than two possible candidates, so the author decided to extend interview invitation to all of them, with a total of eleven invitations sent. However, not all the people contacted, responded to the email, so the targeted sample of two employees and one leader, for three companies, was not achieved. In the end, there was a total of nine interviews, with three leaders and six employees, but the number of employees per team was unequal among companies (see Table 1). The demographic of the sample included both males and females, of three different nationalities, with a majority of Finnish men. The respondents were aged between 35 and 55, with an experience in the company between 13 and 19 years and a leader-

member relationship ranging between 6 months and 7 years. Specifically for leaders, all of them were Finnish men, with an experience in a leadership position ranging between 8.5 and 30 years. Additionally, the three teams involved in the research work in sales support, quality management and product engineering.

**Table 1:** Interviews Overview

No.	Code	Company	Role	Date of the interview	Duration (minutes)
1	EA1	A	Employee	29/04/2024	45
2	EA2	A	Employee	29/04/2024	39
3	LA	A	Leader	30/04/2024	43
4	LB	B	Leader	10/05/2024	45
5	EB1	B	Employee	13/05/2024	40
6	LC	C	Leader	20/05/2024	65
7	EC1	C	Employee	21/05/2024	38
8	EC2	C	Employee	27/05/2024	55
9	EC3	C	Employee	28/05/2024	46

The interviews were all conducted online through Microsoft Teams and the language in use was English, due to the lack of a common other language. The duration of the interviews was on average 46 minutes, ranging from minimum of 38 minutes to a maximum of 65 minutes. All of them were recorded and transcribed automatically by Microsoft teams, so both transcriptions and recordings remained available for both interviewer and interviewee at the end of the call. The automatic transcriptions were checked afterwards by the author, who corrected them in light of the recording.

Transcriptions were analysed through a systematic process, which involved categorising and then reuniting data, in order to recognise recurring themes and reach conclusion based on them. First, the original data were categorised, which means broken down and given a code that summarised their meaning (Saunders et al., 2019). Secondly, those with similar meanings were regrouped in order to understand their relationships (Saunders et al., 2019). As the approach of the thesis is a mixture between inductive and

deductive, the analysis was carried out accordingly. In fact, the coding process was an iterative one, which included changes to the labels. The first step involved a quick screening of the transcripts to make preliminary notes of the most common themes. These notes were then grouped according to the concept contained in the theoretical framework, on the basis of which the first macro-groups of codes were created. On this basis, the interview transcripts were carefully reread and coded. However, as the interviews were coded, some sub-categorisation of the macro codes was made, based on the words and themes that were present in the interview. After the entire coding process was completed and all macro and sub-themes were identified, similar themes were regrouped, and based on them, the findings were understood and described in the following section. Thus, the first part and the third part of the analysis, which involved taking notes and defining codes directly from the data, are consistent with an inductive approach, while the second part, which involved grouping and defining the macro-categories of the data based on the existing theoretical framework, is consistent with a deductive approach.

### **3.4 Quality of the data**

Authors need to address the quality of their research and findings to ensure that they are perceived as credible by others (Saunders et al., 2019). In general, the two most popular assessments of research quality are reliability and validity (Saunders et al., 2019). However, it should be also noted that while these criteria are considered suitable to assess quantitative research, they could be not appropriate for qualitative studies (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). This is due to the fact that qualitative research can fall under different types of philosophies and purposes, so not all of them can have the same evaluation criteria. As a result, every researcher needs to select their criteria, in accordance with their whole research methodology. Specifically, they can choose to adopt the concepts of reliability and validity by applying them to qualitative research, or also use alternative criteria that are either related or independent of the original ones (Saunders et al., 2019). In detail, this thesis uses the concepts of reliability and validity, but contextualises their meaning coherently with the whole research methodology.

Reliability is the extent to which a study can be replicated and achieve the same findings (Saunders et al., 2019). However, as the thesis uses qualitative semi-structured interviews, using this definition literally would define the study as unreliable. In fact, it would not be realistic that a similar study could be replicated exactly in the same way by another researcher, recurring exactly in the same findings (Saunders et al., 2019). Additionally, even the same respondents could have given different answers to the same questions, if the study would have been conducted in another period or setting, because the answers depend on current opinions. However, this does not make necessarily the study unreliable, because in this case, reliability should be interpreted broadly, as consistency of the research (Saunders et al., 2019). In detail, this means that researchers should explain meticulously the rationale behind all their methodological choices, meaning that they should be able to explain how they reasoned about their study, and how data were obtained and analysed (Saunders et al., 2019). For this reason, the author has found it relevant to provide detailed explanation of each single step of their methodological choice and the implications for their study.

Moreover, according to Saunders et al. (2019) reliability is threatened by three types of biases and cultural differences. The first one, interviewer bias, is related to the fact that that interviewer's own attitude, non-verbal behaviour and tone of voice, may influence how the question is perceived (Saunders et al., 2019). Secondly, the interviewee bias is linked to how the latter interprets and reasons about questions, which changes from person to person (Saunders et al., 2019). Thirdly is the participation bias, which is linked to the willingness to be interviewed (Saunders et al., 2019). To overcome these biases, the researcher tried to maintain a neutral behaviour and tone of voice and has not shared any personal opinions on the current topics. In addition, all participants are voluntarily involved in the project, and to ensure their freedom of expression, the interviews were kept anonymous, so the names of participants and companies are not mentioned. In addition, cultural differences can also affect the quality of research by influencing what the interviewee is willing to share and how this is perceived. Although the

cultural differences may be considered a limitation for this study, they have been taken into account when selecting the sample. All teams operate in Finland, and despite not everybody involved is Finnish, all the participants are familiar with this culture. This also applies to the researcher, who is not Finnish herself, but is familiar with Finnish culture after living in Finland.

Validity refers to the extent to which the findings of the study represent the issue under inquiry (Saunders et al., 2019). While in quantitative research this means ensuring that the findings are true and certain, in qualitative studies validity is about providing an accurate description of the phenomenon (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). The qualitative nature of the study and the methodology can pose different threats in this regard, but according to Saunders et al. (2019) semi-structured interviews can still achieve high levels of validity, if questions are carefully addressed and clarified, and answers are explored from different perspectives (Saunders et al., 2019). For this reason, the author attempted to formulate clear questions, that would allow the participants the possibility to reflect on the topic. The decision to provide the questions in advance, was also related to this, as it allowed the participants to familiarise themselves with them and to ask for any clarifications both in advance and during the interview. Moreover, as the concept of work engagement is ambiguous, the author provided the definition proposed by W. B. Schaufeli et al. (2002) and posed the questions on work engagement on their dimensions. Besides, data have been validated by using triangulation, which is the use of multiple perspectives to clarify the findings and specifically triangulation of data was used, so that multiple empirical sources were considered (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). The research involved three different teams, in three companies which were completely independent of each other, and therefore able to provide different interpretations of the phenomenon. Finally, the validity of the research was addressed through member validation, which means sending back some data to the participants, to verify whether they are accurate (Saunders et al., 2019). Respondents had the opportunity to review the interview transcriptions and recordings of the interviews, as well as the outcomes of the data analysis.

Additionally, researchers should consider external validity, also called generalisability, which refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to other contexts (Saunders et al., 2019). In quantitative research this issue is related to the selection of a representative sample, while in qualitative studies it implies an accurate selection of the cases (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). In fact, qualitative research inherently raises concerns about generalisability because it analyses a limited number of cases (Saunders et al., 2019). However, according to Yin (2012) generalisation in qualitative research should be intended as analytical rather than statistical generalisation, which means that a qualitative study should be able to analyse the consistency of findings in light of an existing theory in a predefined setting. For this reason, the number of interviews per se is not an issue, as qualitative research is more concerned with the material collected during the interviews rather than their number (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). This is because qualitative research does not aim to draw conclusions that are generally applicable, but to better analyse a topic in a narrowed specific setting (Lincoln, 2021). As a result, the results of this research cannot be considered generalisable statistically to the entire global population of MNCs, as the author has narrowed down to certain types of MNCs and a specific country in which they operate. Hence, more realistically, the results could be considered applicable only in this setting. However, some alternative criteria refer to this issue as the transferability of the research, which means that the research is externally valid if it enables other researchers to conduct a similar study in other research settings (Saunders et al., 2019). This is achieved by providing accurate descriptions of the entire research process, interpretations and questions (Saunders et al., 2019).

## **4 Findings**

This section is dedicated to the presentation of the research findings. The structure of the discussion is the same as that of the interview and covers the main themes presented in the literature review. First, there is a brief part about the perception of the multinational context, which was the background open question of the interview guide (Appendix 1). It was considered relevant to include this part, as the multinational environment is indeed the main context in which the research is applied. This is followed by a description of the findings on the understanding of work engagement from the perspective of both employees and leaders. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings on leadership as a driver of employee engagement under the two main theoretical perspectives of the framework: positive leadership and leader-member relationship.

### **4.1 Perception of the multinational context**

Before the specific questions about leadership and work engagement, all interviewees were asked to share their opinion about working in a multinational company, identifying opportunities and challenges of that context. This kind of open question was useful to guide the interviewees to reflect about their working experience in the company, and understand their feelings about the multinational environment. In general, all interviewees gave similar answers to the question, meaning that the perception of the multinational context is similar among leaders and employees. The following is a description of the main themes that have emerged.

In terms of opportunities, the most important is the international multicultural environment itself. Indeed, it was mentioned as positive remark, by almost all the interviewees. As a first note, this can be an intrinsic characteristic of the job, which means that some types of jobs are made to be international. In other words, there are some types of jobs, that are international from the beginning, as Interviewee EA1 points out:

*I think the functions of marketing and sales have always been very international. So, it's very natural and very easy. (EA1)*

On the other hand, for other types of jobs, working in a multinational company gives the possibility to widen the job offer, meaning that thanks to the international environment, people have the chance to try new roles and learn different ways of working.

*I do like working in a multinational company because I like what it offers, which is of course a wide range of variable and versatile job contents, job descriptions and opportunities. (LC)*

Many respondents mentioned also the cultural aspect. This is because working in a company with branches in several countries, gives the possibility to work with different people, both colleagues and customers. That enriches the work experience, as it makes it possible to learn different ways of working. This means that people's cultural diversity is considered a positive aspect, that offers opportunities for both personal and professional growth.

*We have the opportunity to connect to different people, from different parts of the world, and from different cultures and so on. And I think this is really bringing an extra flavour to the job. (EB1)*

*We are experiencing different cultures, and that's really great. For example, within this team we have five different nationalities, and we are working indeed in three different countries, so this is something that I really like. (LA)*

Secondly, another opportunity mentioned by some respondents is the chance to travel and work abroad. This can take the form of a few days' business trip, a short-term assignment, or the possibility of moving abroad for a longer period of time. According to the interviewees this is a big opportunity for professional growth, which enables understanding deeply how to work with other cultures.

*Working in this multinational company gives a lot of job possibilities abroad, and not only in our home country, by being part of multinational teams. For example, I was working seven years abroad and this gave me an additional perspective about working with different cultures. (LB)*

On the other hand, interviewees recognise challenges in MNCs. Most interviewees stressed that the multicultural and complex nature of this context can also be a problem. This is because dealing with diversity can be difficult, and it is necessary to learn to accept different cultures and ways of thinking. Indeed, combining different cultures and ways of working can sometimes be challenging, because some practices that are effective in one culture, may not be effective in another. As a result, MNCs' employees need to have an attitude to work in this environment, meaning that they should enjoy working within complexity and diversity, because otherwise daily work may become overwhelming.

*You have to consider that all nations are different, and so you should be flexible and accept what is different compared to your view. (EA2)*

*If you don't like this kind of organisation, it might overwhelm and challenge you. You must be kind of a personality that adapts the corporate policies, and you must be ready to play the game of a big multinational corporation. (LC)*

Meanwhile, although both leaders and employees admit the existence of cultural differences, and they know that they have a significant impact on the way they work, some of them consider it as a minor problem. In other words, they acknowledge the possibility of cultural clashes, but do not consider it as a major issue, as they believe that it is just necessary to learn how to adapt and communicate effectively.

*You have these cultural challenges, and those can be of different size and magnitude, but personally I haven't had big issues with the cultural differences. You can always find a way to understand those and to manage them. (EB1)*

On a more practical level, some of the interviewees mentioned the problem of time zones. This is more of an organisational problem, which requires people to be flexible, as working with people in different parts of the world, requires the availability to organise meetings even very early in the morning or late in the evening.

*I was thinking about challenges of this context: I guess working with different time zones while having a common meeting. For example, I have team members*

*in US, Malaysia and then in Finland, so having a common team meeting can be a little bit challenging, because somewhere it's morning and somewhere it's already evening or even night. And sometimes there are late calls, with the US especially, because they have morning, and we have already evening. (LA)*

As a result, there is no doubt that working in an MNC presents both opportunities and challenges, but in general all respondents emphasised the opportunities rather than the challenges. For all of them, the opportunities outweigh the challenges, which means that the multinational environment itself is seen as an essential factor of their work. This means that the MNC context is the first main source of engagement for some of the respondents, both leaders and employees. First, the multinational environment is a reason for their loyalty to the company, meaning that they stay within it because they like this kind of context. Second, working in a multinational company is considered a source of energy. Indeed, for some interviewees, the opportunities offered by this environment are currently one of sources of their energy in their current work.

*Being multinational is an opportunity: you can learn, interact, and cooperate with different countries and multidisciplinary teams. And that is really one of the best parts that I like about working this company. I always want to turn that as a positive thing, and that really gives extra energy in that way. (LB)*

## **4.2 Understanding of work engagement**

The first part of the interview was dedicated to identifying how leaders and employees understand employee work engagement. To this end, the interviewees were asked a few questions based on the three dimensions of work engagement proposed by Schaufeli et al. (2002): vigor, dedication and absorption. Different themes emerged from the responses, but were not specifically related to one of the dimensions. In other words, the themes emerged relate to work engagement in general, and not specifically to one of the dimensions, except for a few specific topics referring to absorption. What emerged from the responses is fairly consistent across leaders, employees and organisations, which means that there is no significant difference in the perception of engagement between leaders and employees. However, some of the issues were emphasised more by

leaders, or in certain organisations. This shows that engagement is partly a general concept, because there are some recurring themes among leaders and followers, but also partly dependent on specific conditions, which may be the organisational context or the personal life. All this given, the themes emerged have been clustered into three main categories: work environment, elements of the job, and other personal reasons.

With regard to the work environment, many respondents mentioned its social aspect as one of the sources of engagement. They explained that the opportunity to meet people physically and exchange experiences with them, is an element that brings energy to go to work and do the job. The social exchange is intended in working with colleagues, with whom they collaborate to achieve a common result, and from whom they can learn, thanks to their professional experience. Moreover, the pleasure of sociality extends also to customers and other types of stakeholders.

*When you actually meet the people, you get also energy from them. This is also kind of partially what makes me enthusiastic: when we are going to meet colleagues that we don't see every day. (EA1)*

*I like to work with people who are very experienced, so that know their work, how to do things, and have a lot of knowledge about our topics. We have a lot of those people, so it's constant learning and I love that. (EC1)*

However, the social aspect is not the only element of the working environment, as respondents mentioned that it should also be a safe place to work. This means that there should be harmony between team members, because if they get on well with each other, this creates a positive place to work. Indeed, some interviewees mentioned how understanding one's own work and the efforts of others, leads to better coordination and mutual understanding, and this can be an effective way of boosting one's engagement.

Moreover, interviewees also identified a challenging environment, as a positive driver of their work engagement, which is facilitated by the relationship with colleagues. Then, it has been also specified that other people's engagement may have a spillover effect on

the single individual. In other words, leaders and employees get work engagement also by their coworkers, when these demonstrate to be highly motivated themselves.

*My motivation is influenced by the fact that my coworkers are highly motivated, so that they challenge me, and I can do the same. (EC2)*

*I have high professionals in my team, so that of course gives also me energy when they are very highly motivated to do their work and very committed themselves. So, then it's also easy for me to kind of engage with them, and give them the needed support. It's really a kind of spin further on the energy spin. (LB)*

Other aspects of the working environment include opportunities for learning and development, in terms of the ability to learn something new or to develop in current or new roles. This topic was highlighted mainly by leaders, who described it as a key driver of their engagement. However, this was also recognised by interviewee EA1 who, when asked about something that could improve their engagement, briefly mentioned the possibility of having more opportunities to learn.

*I feel motivated in this environment and in this company, because it offers continuity and chances to learn. I still have quite a few years on my career left, so it provides me quite good opportunities for carrier development. (LC)*

The second main theme that explains employees' and leaders' understanding of work engagement is the job itself. In short this means that engaged people are the ones who like their work. This is meant strictly in terms of nature and variety of the tasks, but also in terms of the field in which people work. In other words, people who have an interest in and attitude towards their area of work, are the ones who value their job, and therefore are more engaged. In general, both leaders and employees prefer to work with a variety of task, that are closely related to their area of interest, and that they enjoy doing.

*I don't like to sit only in office and do the same job every day. My tasks can be different compared to previous day, so this gives me right to say that I like this job. It would have been boring for me, doing the same job day by day. (EA2)*

*It's really the wide range of tasks and area of responsibility where I can kind of put my own focus on, that gives the motivation or the energy. (LB)*

Furthermore, work engagement is not just about the practical aspects of work, but it is also about having a meaningful job. This means that people are engaged, when they perceive that they are working for a purpose, which can be either something broad or very specific. Indeed, some respondents mentioned that what makes them committed in their work is the idea that what they are doing is important, in the sense that it contributes to making a positive difference in the world, in their company or in their work environment.

*Working with things that matter gives me energy. I mean if I work with topics that I know that are important and mean something to other people. (EB1)*

*We are working for the sustainable future and making the difference, with the technologies this company provides. So that makes me enthusiastic about this job and role, because I believe I am part of this kind of future sustainable solutions, even if in a small part. I think that's very important. (LC)*

Many respondents also mentioned the opportunity to help others, as another aspect of having a meaningful job. However, this is highly dependent on the nature of the role and the work, as some jobs involve dealing directly with the final customer, while others are more of a support role for colleagues. In the former case, people are motivated by delivering a good quality product or service to the customer, who is shown to be satisfied.

*It's the work that I'm part of that makes me enthusiastic: we are improving our products, small steps at a time. So, I feel motivated if I am able to help customers with my work. (EB1)*

Then, when the work is functional for other teams, people appreciate it when their work makes other people's jobs easier. In this way they contribute indirectly to satisfy the final customer, or to make the company's processes more efficient. These two scenarios can also be combined, meaning that sometimes people's work can either satisfy the end customer or help other colleagues. In any case the concept is always the same, so that a job is considered meaningful, and therefore a source of engagement, when it has a positive impact on other people.

*I'd say that one thing giving me motivation it's the opportunity to help other people. My role is to make their work easier, at least that's how I see it, so that's what drives me in doing my current job. (EC1)*

Still regarding the job itself, and specifically the concept of absorption, so the ability to keep concentration in the role, some respondents talked about the organisation of the job. This idea was mainly shared by interviewees from company B, who explained that in order to be adequately absorbed in the role, it is necessary to have an appropriate workload. This means that it should be balanced, in the sense that it should be neither too little, nor too much, and that there should be sufficient resources in the team, so as not to overburden all other members.

That is also reflected in the need to have specific objectives, and to be able to set the right priorities. This was particularly emphasised by leaders LB e LC, who explained how having clear strategic actions and pre-defined deadlines is a way of keeping them active and focused on their work. Also, leaders point out the importance of prioritisation: having good skills in that, enables to keep the level of concentration, and therefore engagement in the role. According to them, it is inevitable that there are multiple tasks to be done, but it is necessary for everyone to set the right priorities and organise their own workload efficiently. A partial reference to this was made by interviewee EA2, who, although not referring to prioritisation, suggested that having clear information and objectives was one of the elements that could improve engagement.

*We have much to do and sometimes people feel overwhelmed with the tasks, development programmes, and the time is not enough. But that is just a common factor fact factor of working. So, I think that having more in mind the importance of prioritisation would be useful to improve engagement. (LB)*

*We have taken the prioritisation from the business to a very detailed practical level, as well as to each individual. So that also keeps me concentrated for sure, because I need to deliver something in given time and keep my promises. (LC)*

In addition to the common themes of working environment and job elements mentioned above, other individual themes emerged in some of the interviews. Specifically, some of

them talked about the salary, the influence of private life on work mood, and the need to have a strict relationship with colleagues, sharing also personal experiences with them.

*The first motivating factor is the salary, that comes out from the efforts and time that I'm spending here. (LC)*

*From my point of view what keeps me focused are my family and private life. So, if everything is alright at home, then I will also be absorbed into the work. Otherwise, I will not concentrate during the daily routine. (EA2)*

*We all come from the same cultural background, and we do similar leisure activities outside of work. So, we can share similar experiences about what we have been doing, and that is really giving me energy. (LB)*

To summarise, both leaders and employees understand work engagement as a combination of elements of the work environment, the people in it and of the job. Therefore, engagement is primarily fostered by working with other people, so by being able to see people, socialise and share the work experience with them. Indeed, individuals' engagement is influenced by others' attitude in the workplace. This means that if the person is in a stimulating work environment, where other people are themselves engaged, then this will reflect on the individual, which will develop engagement. In particular, leaders emphasise the importance of learning and development for their engagement, which means having a working environment where they can develop professionally.

However, a good working environment is not the only characteristics of work engagement, as also elements of the job and personal reasons, have a role in that. Firstly, it is important that people have a passion and attitude for their work, so that they enjoy the nature and variety of the tasks and challenges involved. In detail, work engagement is fostered by having a meaningful job, intended as working with a purpose, so being able to make the difference with their job. The way this is pursued, depends intrinsically on the type of job, but most of the respondents agree that they are engaged, if what they do can be helpful to other people, be they colleagues, customers or other stakeholders. Then, in terms of absorption, respondents mentioned the organisation of work, in the sense of having clear objectives and plans and, specifically for leaders, being able to set

the right priorities. However, it should be noted that individuals' work engagement is also influenced by owners' personal motives, such as salary, satisfaction with private and family life, and need to share personal experiences with colleagues.

Thus, at a general level, leaders and employees have a similar understanding of work engagement, with only a few differences, such as leaders focusing more on learning and development and prioritisation. However, while there are some commonalities in the understanding of work engagement, it should be noted that there are also strictly personal elements that influence it. This means that while there seems to be a common basis for engagement, this is still a variable concept that is interpreted differently by each individual. For this reason, it is preliminary notable that leadership may have an impact on some aspects, for example in creating a positive working environment, or in giving interesting tasks and clear instructions. However, leadership may be less effective on other elements, which are strictly personal factors relating to the individual's motivation and private life. Therefore, a first consideration to be drawn from this, is that there are no significant differences between leaders and employees when it comes to understanding work engagement. This means that leaders can effectively influence engagement in some way, but also that this can only be partial, because work engagement also includes elements that are outside the direct influence of managers.

### **4.3 Leadership as source of engagement**

The most important part of the interview was dedicated to understanding leaders' and employees' perception of leadership and leader-member relationship. So, there was a set of questions dedicated to assessing the pathways of the positive leadership model proposed by Decuyper and Schaufeli (2020), accordingly to the theoretical framework. As a reminder, the thesis considered the "material", "motivational", "affective" and "behavioural" pathways under the concept of positive leadership, while the "cognitive" pathway was interpreted differently, through the LMX theory. This means that there was a specific set of questions about leadership, which was aimed to investigate more in

detailed the four pathways above mentioned. Then, there was another set of questions aimed at better understanding the perception of the leader-member relationship.

In practice, however, during the interviews the themes of positive leadership and leader-member relationship were mixed up. In other words, there was no clear distinction between which elements were typical of positive leadership and which of a good leader-member relationship. This is because the two concepts are closely related and influence each other. Nevertheless, the author tried to present the findings according to the theoretical framework and thus to structure the discussion on what are the characteristics of positive leadership and leader-member relationship that enhance engagement among MNC employees. Though codification and analysis the author highlights some topics, trying to distinguish between what depends on leaders' behaviour only, and what is about the leader-member relationship. However, it is noticeable that many issues from one category to the other are closely related or complementary. On this basis, the discussion is divided into the two main theoretical perspectives of the thesis: positive leadership and leader-member exchange.

#### **4.3.1 Positive leadership**

One of the most important elements that emerges about leadership is the need to provide employees with autonomy and feedback. Firstly, the opportunity to be autonomous was explicitly mentioned as something that employees value most, because it makes them feel good and worthy. Indeed, with regard to the role of leaders, some employees made it clear that they despised micromanagement. Leaders also claimed that autonomy, so allowing each individual to determine how they work, organise themselves and define their own future, is one of the most important aspects influencing employee motivation.

*I'm quite self-driven and independent. So, I absolutely despise micromanaging and the leader being there all the time, telling me what I should be doing and how to do it. (EC1)*

*I would say that giving people the chance to define their own future, is the biggest thing that one as a leader can give, and that thus can influence the team, its behaviour, and secure that focus is on the right topic. (LB)*

Secondly, another aspect of leadership that engages employees is clear direction and feedback. This was mentioned by both leaders and followers, in the sense that both recognised that leaders should be able to give clear instructions and set specific targets. In particular, leaders emphasised that it is necessary to be clear from the beginning, so to set clear targets and discuss individually how to achieve them. Meanwhile, it is also necessary for leaders to follow up on their employees, reviewing with them what has been done and possibly redefining the goals. They should spend time giving constructive feedback so that people can learn, share their experiences and develop.

*It is important to have a leader that gives feedback, whether good or bad, in a way that makes it very clear also from his point of view, how important is what we are doing. (EA1)*

*It is important to share a clear target setting for the role itself. If and once the team members understand clearly what is anticipated by the manager, for sure it will increase the motivation for their work, so what they are aiming for and that I will also see the results. (LA)*

In addition to providing autonomy and feedback, leaders should also play an active role in supporting employees' personal and professional needs. This relates firstly to the manager's basic duty to provide resources for employees' work, which according to respondents can be either tangible or intangible. The former include facilities, IT equipment and tools, although these were emphasised more by leaders than by employees. The latter, on the other hand, focused their attention on intangible resources, which are networks and other types of information that managers can provide to facilitate employees' work. This is because it is the manager's responsibility to give more information or to provide channels and contacts of other people who have it. This kind of sharing applies to the level of daily workload and tasks, but also extends to the range of opportunities that a company can offer. So, the leader is a guide, directing people to the right channels.

*He's providing information and he's very good with all the communication things. He keeps the team always in the loop about the important things that are happening. He is also connecting us to the people sometimes that we need, if we don't know where to go then. (EA1)*

*I'm offering the channel to the company resources, because of course none of them are mine. I'm just the key to the door of the warehouse where you get the resources, or to a person who knows where to get the resources. (LC)*

This means that if employees have any kind of problem that stops them from doing their job, the leader should step in and provide advice, guidance and information. Employees emphasised that it is important not to be left alone, and that the manager should be available when they need help. So, employees should be able to ask questions to the leader, who should be easily accessible and proactively spend time helping them with their problems.

*The best I can get from my leader is good advice on certain matters that I need help with. I can ask for help very easily. (EB1)*

*The thing I need from my leader is to be there when I have a really difficult issue, or problem that I cannot solve, so it's mostly about the support. So, that I have someone to lean on when I can't handle something: that's the most important thing in my opinion. (EC1)*

*Leaders are assumed to be taking care of each team member's personal needs per given process per given time, schedules and per event. So, I believe in being easily approachable, present, and a personal support when needed. (LC)*

The support provided by leaders goes beyond the job itself, so daily work issues and specific objectives, and extends to a personal level. This means that leaders should also support their employees in their own personal development, interests and needs. One way of doing this is to actively provide advice and opportunities to support employees' willingness to learn. In this respect, the leader of company C emphasises that this should be a support for the individual that goes beyond the team itself if necessary, accepting that this may also lead to leaving the team to pursue their career. It is also mentioned

that leaders should also consider the personal life of employees, and in particular managers recognise that this is crucial as the personal life also influences the working life.

*Whenever I mentioned that I would like to learn something, he will make sure that it's possible for me to do that: he will give some insights of how to do that, and support with any individual development I would like to get. (EC1)*

*If people have some personal things in their life going on, I need to consider them, because work is big part of the life, but we have also our personal life, which may have struggles in that. (LA)*

Another part of leadership is the influence that leaders have in terms of emotions and attitude, as their mood at work also affects employees. In detail, followers mentioned that leaders' good mood, manners and calm attitude, are among the elements that positively influence their motivation at work. This has also been recognised by leaders, who focused on the ability to bring positive thinking into the workplace, as this contributes to create a good environment within the team, and therefore encourage people to give their best in what they do. Specifically, being optimistic, is a way to create a positive energy spin, which means that if the leaders are positive themselves, they will spread positivity around employees.

*It's clear that the positive mood and attitude effects to the employees' attitude, so at least from my side, I'm always trying to be optimistic and positive as it will generate positive atmosphere and environment within the team. Also, I try to avoid bringing any kind of negative mood into the meetings, because it can affect to others around me. (LA)*

Leaders also believe that it is necessary to remove negativity from the workplace, in the sense of creating a team atmosphere where negative thinking does not spread, otherwise it could be harmful for employees. Meanwhile, they also recognise that it is useful to normalise bad emotions, meaning that people should be aware of them, and be given the chance to feel them. Indeed, the problem it's not the bad day itself, but the continuous negativity spreading around. Leaders therefore have a pivotal role in maintaining a good atmosphere, so they should be able to accept and support employees through their

difficult times by being open about how they feel, while also keeping their professionalism. Also, it is leaders' duty to recognise negativity, and prevent it from developing.

*Emotions belong to the daily interactions. I show out my feelings and my moods, and I expect that my people will do that as well. So, I give them freedom to be angry, be annoyed, be happy. I mean that's what we are: people. However, if I see increasing negativity in my team, I need to act immediately. (LC)*

Moreover, the example set by leaders is not just about showing out emotions, but it extends to a general level of attitudes and values. This means that employees imitate leaders and learn work related and personal attitudes. This is individual, meaning that in their responses, each employee mentioned a different aspect that see in their leader's behaviour. On the other hand, also leaders have a different perception of what kind of attitudes and lessons they try to convey to their employees.

*Leaders are role models, so consciously and maybe also unconsciously you are following what they're doing and saying and how they are saying certain things. I think I have been influenced by the leaders in my work now and in the past in many matters, because of how they behave. (EB1)*

In any case, leaders communicate either personal or MNCs' values. This is meant in the sense that all leaders represent the company they work for, so it is their duty to give an example of the values on which it is based. Meanwhile, leaders also have their personal values, through which they influence employees, whether or not they are associated with the company.

*I think that the first leaders you meet when coming into the company, are among the most important people you meet when you start an employment in any company. Because if the manager gives bad vibes, this will also negatively impact the push ups and of the company. (EC1)*

*From my current manager I have learned to trust people because, he trusts people and that is very important in our life. (EA2)*

*Within the company we support building a culture of integrity and conduct the business in a way that is a safe and fair and honest. So that is something that I'm highlighting within our team, and also acting way myself as a leader. (LA)*

#### **4.3.2 Leader-member exchange**

The first thing to consider when looking at a relationship is the nature of that relationship. Specifically, most respondents considered their own leader-member relationship to be quite good. This means different things to different people, but everyone understands that it is a relationship and should be treated as such. Leaders specifically mentioned that it was important to have a good and personal relationship with employees, which means being close enough to know them and understand their needs. This is at a general level, then it depends a lot on the individual, as some of them are interested in taking it to a more personal level, sharing experiences outside work, while others prefer to keep it more of a professional relationship.

*We are good colleagues, I would say. But of course, we are not completely sharing everything we think about: probably nobody does that with their superior. I guess it's like this typical work relationship, but it's on a good level. (EB1)*

*I think even if we are in a working relationship, it is still a relationship, which means that you need be ready to give out something of yourself to be in a good relationship, and I think we have done it both ways. (LC)*

However, both leaders and employees agree that it is beneficial to have an equal relationship. Specifically, while people still understand the roles of manager and employee, it makes it easier to work, when the manager is at the same level as the employee, rather than in a traditional vertical relationship. This increases the possibility of reaching the leader easily and getting the support they need for their work, with a low barrier.

*I feel he is more like a coworker than a supervisor. It's easy to have conversations between us and give own opinions and other that kind of stuff. (EC2)*

*For me there's no corner for a vertical manager-employee type of approach: in my team we are all the same. My team is open and positive, it's a two-way*

*communication. For me it's more like a tutor type of role, that sometimes I need to take. (LC)*

In addition to being close, easily reachable and on the same level as employees, there are different kinds of interpersonal behaviours that impact the relationship between leaders and followers. In detail, employees perceive that it is important for leaders to be fair, so that they treat everybody equally, regardless personal and professional differences, and to perceive that everyone in the team has the same opportunities. It is also essential that people feel trusted, which is closely linked to the autonomy mentioned above. This means that just as leaders should give and support autonomy, they should also show that they trust people. This should be also reciprocal, meaning that employees should trust the leader back as well.

*I think he treats us equally, so that we all feel equal participants of the team. Even if I'm doing slightly different tasks compared to the other team members, we are kind of treated equally anyway. (EC3)*

*We have a really good culture in the team. I have feedback from them that they have trust in me, and I also trust them. (LA)*

Other important characteristics of the leader-member relationship are empathy and transparency. However, it should be noted that these characteristics are personal, meaning that each person puts specific attention on some of those depending on their own perspective. That said, someone perceived important for the leader to be emphatic, and to make the person feel comfortable about how they feel. Then, others pointed out how it is important for a leader to be transparent, both in the sense of being honest about the reason for certain decisions, but also on a personal level, showing their personality.

Then, a theme that emerged repeatedly across respondents was the need to show appreciation and interest in one's work. It is felt to be necessary for leaders to show employees that they value them on both a professional and personal level. In detail, employees, focused their attention on when the leaders recognise and praise the efforts, by being grateful and giving credit when something is achieved. In fact, employees

appreciate when leaders take an active interest in their work and, as mentioned above, provide feedback and follow up. Related to this theme, leaders emphasised the need to celebrate success, so to share everybody success also on a team level, to make them feel that their work is worthwhile. On the other hand, there should be an acceptance of failure, so that everyone feels they can make mistakes and learn from them.

*He always says that he likes what I am doing, that is very valuable for the company, and thanks me for that, and from my point of view this is important. (EA2)*

*I talk openly about the successes of my team members, because I want to demonstrate them, that they have a crucial role in the organisation. (LB)*

*It is very comfortable, when you feel the psychological safety that you can be yourself and that you are allowed to make mistakes, so take risks and try new things. (EA1)*

Another key aspect of the relationship between leaders and followers is open communication, in the sense that people can easily ask for help or express their needs. All the leaders interviewed try to create an open relationship so that each of their employees feels free to approach them and speak up if there is a problem, both at a team and individual level. Such an attempt has proved successful, as almost all respondents feel that this kind of relationship does indeed exist and that it is possible to be open and honest with their leaders and talk to them about any kind of need.

*I can be quite open and honest towards my superior, as I know that if I say something in confidential, it stays confidential. (EB1)*

*I have this kind of "open door policy" in my team. If they have an individual need, a team need, or you have an any idea, question or problem, they can just come to me we can solve it together. It's just a matter of communication. (LC)*

However, it is not enough to have an open atmosphere where everyone can talk about their needs; leaders should be proactive in listening to employees. In fact, employees feel valued when the leader takes the time to listen to their needs and concerns, and takes action to address them. This means that leaders should be able to give people

space to express their problems, listen to them and then proactively try to help them. There needs to be an ongoing and explicit dialogue between managers and employees, so that managers not only give feedback but also actively discuss it with employees. Indeed, it is the opportunity to exchange information and opinions with their current managers and to have their point of view taken into account that keeps employees engaged. However, just as it is important that objectives are well defined, it is also important how they are communicated and that discussions are explicit and clear.

*When we need something, he will try to take care of it: he listens and he's also trying to find ways to support us. With the attitude he has, you still have the feeling that he's listening to you when you have concerns. (EA1)*

*It's really about dedicating time to the team to address things and secure that we are moving in the right direction. (LB)*

These kinds of discussions take place both at a team level and at an individual level. According to most of the interviewees, individual discussions are a useful tool that leaders can use, to support employees in their work. In line with what has been described above, this makes it easier to speak up about some issues and enables a focused conversation on certain topics that are important. However, when it comes to talking at an individual level, some interviewees stressed that it is important to adapt the style of communication. This topic emerged particularly in relation to multicultural and international teams, meaning that cultural differences have a significant impact on how people perceive messages. As a result, leaders should be aware of these differences, and adjust their way of interacting accordingly.

*It's very practical to have these one to one and open discussions, but when you're doing this in a multicultural environment, you need to have the knowledge about how to behave with certain teams, people and cultures. (LC)*

*One of the challenges that you have in MNCs, is about the communication style. I mean: different people need different types of communication. (EA1)*

All this said, what matters in terms of leader-member relationship is the mutual understanding. That is intended to both sides, so that the leader understands the employees

and vice versa. Indeed, when people in different roles understand each other, then it becomes a reciprocal relationship, where both parts understand each other, and respond accordingly to their behaviours. This is a rather broad concept, which first of all involves understanding one's own situation. Specifically, employees interviewed recognised that managers themselves, sometimes, may not have time, power or specific resources to fully meet their requirements and needs.

*He's quite a good leader. He only has too many things to do, so it's not his fault that he is quite heavily booked. (EC2)*

Then, another important aspect of mutual understanding concerns personalities and attitudes. This issue was mentioned frequently by both types of interviewees, as both leaders and employees recognised how similarities and differences between them, affect their way of working. Since we are all humans, it is necessary to learn to understand and deal successfully with the personalities and attitudes of others. The interviewees highlighted the benefits of being similar and different. Specifically, when leaders and employees share similar personalities, this makes the work smoother because people understand each other better, and communication between them is clearer and more direct.

*Every team member is an individual with their strengths and improvement needs, so of course, I need to understand a little bit my team members' personalities. (LC)*

*It's very easy to get to the point when we have a similar thinking. For example, if you talk about the problem statement or if there is a challenge in the work, you don't need to explain it in detail, because we know what we are talking about. (LB)*

However, both leaders and employees are positive about their differences. This means that when there are differences in attitudes and personalities, those make the relationship better, because people can balance each other out. This means that people look at each other, and learn from each other, so they try to understand what are the positive things that they want to emulate, and what are the behaviours that they want or avoid.

In any case, at a general level, interviewees perceive that diversity in the relationship is a positive note that enriches the outcomes of such a relationship.

*We have like opposite personalities, he is patient and I'm not, but I think it works well, because it's a good balance. (EA1)*

*The coin has always two sides: you can work very strongly together and have good opinions and get straight to the point, but then when you are too similar that is then off to something else. (LB)*

Interviewees were also asked about their understanding of leaders' expectations towards employees. In all the answers, this issue was strictly related to leaders' duty to give clear directions and feedback, and to communicate effectively. According to employees, when there are clear targets and guidelines, then, other leaders' expectations towards them do not seem to have a big impact on their engagement. To be more specific, it seems that the role of expectations is more related to perceptions of job quality, which has an indirect impact on engagement, but there does not seem to be a direct impact of expectations on employee engagement.

*I think our team is already quite heavily motivated in what we are doing. Everybody is doing their best because of the atmosphere, so it kind of leads us to a situation when the leader doesn't have to have expectations. (EC2)*

In short, leadership and the leader-member relationship are interrelated, and both play a role in influencing the work engagement of MNC employees. Hence, the distinction between them is not always clear, as there are common or highly correlated elements in both. Under the theme of positive leadership have been clustered actions and behaviours which are mainly dependent on leaders, while the leader-member relationship includes elements that arise from the interaction between leaders and employees. However, it should be noted that having a clear and unambiguous classification between them is not even useful, as what matters is their effect on employees' engagement.

Leadership influences employee engagement through the provision of autonomy and feedback, support for employees' needs, positive emotions and modelling of work

attitudes and values. Specifically, respondents recognised that employees should be given autonomy to do their jobs and that leaders should set clear objectives and provide continuous feedback to enable people to develop their careers. Another key aspect of the leader's role is to support people's needs, which includes providing well-functioning facilities and equipment, as well as networks of contacts and relevant information to facilitate people's work. Leaders should also make themselves available when needed, and this kind of support also extends to employees' personal needs, which include their own interests and willingness to develop. In addition, leaders influence engagement through their emotions, meaning that if they are in a positive mood, employees will respond accordingly. However, leaders also emphasise that bad emotions should be normalised and that it is their duty to prevent negativity from spreading within the team. Managers are also role models in terms of general attitudes to work and personal and company values. This means that everyone observes and therefore imitates some relevant behaviours of leaders at work. In fact, leaders are the company's representatives, so it is their duty to communicate the company's values to employees.

In terms of the leader-member relationship, it should be equal, tailored to the individual and based on caring interpersonal behaviour; communication should be open and there should be mutual understanding of the parties. Most interviewees defined their leader-member relationship as good, but that means different things to different people. However, it was also generally emphasised that it is important to have an equal relationship with low barriers, meaning a horizontal rather than a vertical leader-follower relationship. This relationship should be also characterised by a set of interpersonal behaviours that promote the creation of a psychologically safe environment where everyone can develop, make mistakes and feel themselves. In particular, there should be transparency, fairness, trust, empathy and appreciation between leaders and employees, in the sense that the former should show interest in, and gratitude for the work of the latter. Another key aspect of a good leader-member relationship is open communication between the parties, meaning that employees should feel free to express their needs and feel that leaders are proactively listening to them. Indeed, there should be constant and explicit

dialogue between the two, even at a very individual level. As mentioned earlier, leaders and employees should know each other well, in the sense that they understand each other's positions, personalities and attitudes, and can deal effectively with their similarities and differences. When there is an open, personal and clear relationship, people feel engaged and do not feel that leaders have different expectations of them, which affect their motivation.

This suggests that leaders have a significant role in influencing employee engagement, both through their leadership behaviours and the relationship they build with their employees. In some cases, leaders and employees focused on slightly different issues, but this is due to the diversity of their roles and therefore their perspectives. However, despite some slight differences, there is a clear overview from both groups of the characteristics of leadership and leader-member relationship that lead to successful employee work engagement in MNCs. To summarise what has been said before, the role of leaders is to support employees in their work, while at the same time guiding them and ensuring the creation of a safe working environment. However, leaders' actions are inextricably linked to the relationship they establish with their employees, in which the latter also play a role. The process of fostering employee engagement is therefore based on continuous interaction among leaders' personality, behaviours, emotions, and proactive interactions with their employees.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

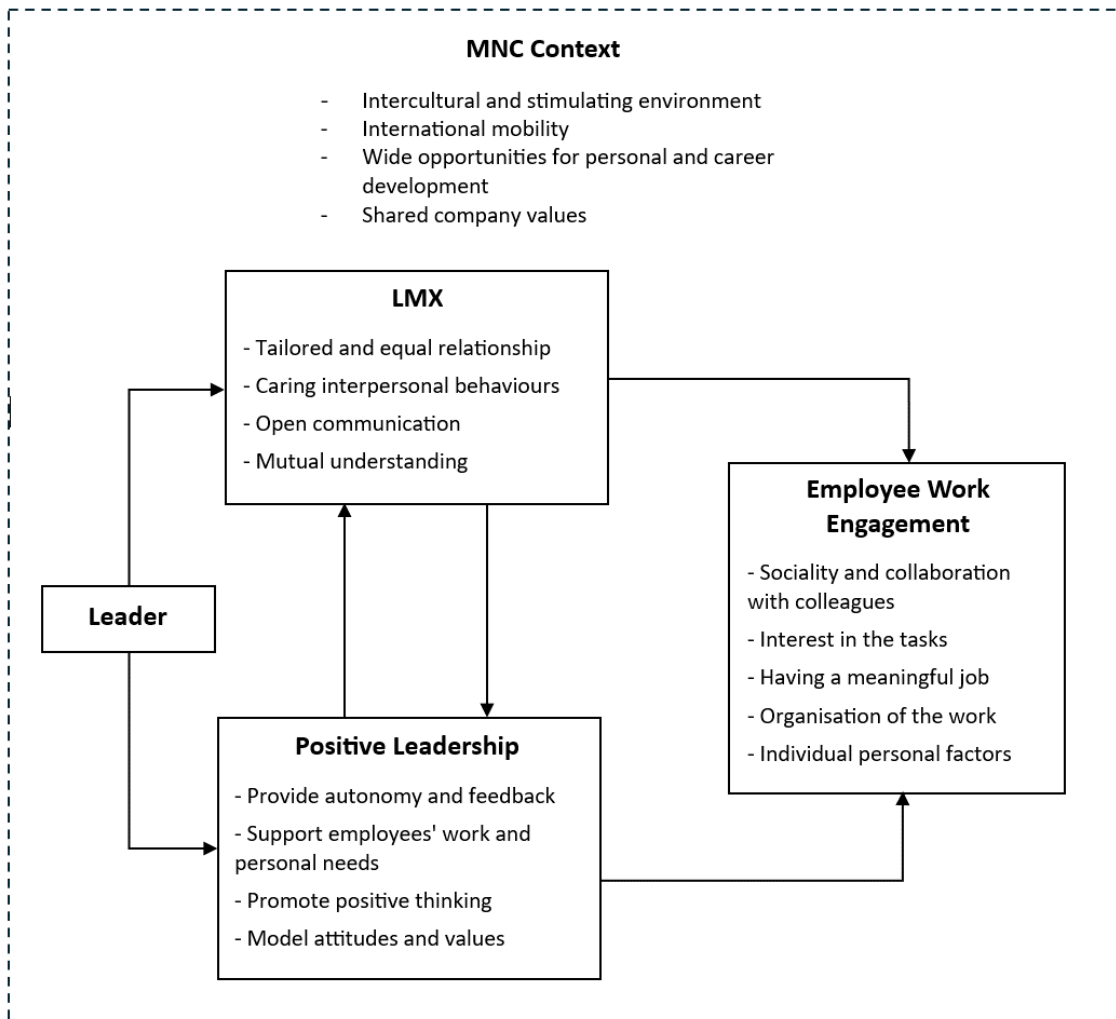
This final section presents a discussion of the findings and a conclusion to the research. First, an adapted theoretical framework is presented, that modifies and complements the previous one considering the research findings. After that, a detailed explanation is provided on the new framework, analysed also in light of the previous literature. This is followed by the conclusions, which first addresses the theoretical and managerial contributions, so they explain how the current research extends the existing literature, and what are the practical implications for leaders and MNCs. The current section provides also a detailed description of the potential limitations of the study, and as a conclusion gives insights for future research on the current topics.

### 5.1 Discussion of the findings

As a reminder, the research was aimed at understanding the impact of leadership on employee work engagement, by using a dyadic perspective. Specifically, the thesis was aimed to answer the following research question: “How do leaders influence employees’ work engagement in MNCs?”. In particular, the objectives of the research were to:

- Identify how leaders and employees understand employee work engagement.
- Discover attitudes, actions, behaviours and emotions that leaders should adopt to foster employees’ work engagement.
- Analyse how the relationship between leaders and followers impacts work engagement.

The original theoretical framework (Figure 2) was created to summarise the theoretical perspectives taken, to answer the research question and meet the thesis objectives. Now, following the empirical research, the earlier theoretical framework has been updated to include the main findings of the research (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Updated theoretical framework considering research findings

The structure of the updated framework is similar to the original, but includes more specific information in light of the research findings. The first thing to note is that some of the themes in different boxes are closely related. This was already anticipated in the findings section, and it is due to the nature of the issues under investigation. Indeed, in the answers of the interview there was no clear distinction between what could be labelled LMX, and what positive leadership, rather there was a unique discussion about respondents' perception of the topics. Hence, the distinction between the two was made later in the analysis, but sometimes the issues were so interconnected, that it was not clear what might depend solely on the leader's behaviour, and what might depend on the relationship with their followers. The same applies to the concept of work

engagement, which was sometimes so intertwined with the other two themes that it was not easy to isolate it. However, the fact that some themes are repeated among the classes, and are not so easy to distinguish among each other, is consistent with the perspective that work engagement is socially constructed (Boccoli et al., 2023). In this thesis, the original interpretation of this perspective was that work engagement is socially constructed between leaders and their employees, but according to the findings of the research, it is possible to extend the idea to the whole workplace. In other words, work engagement is socially constructed within the whole MNC context, and not just between leaders and employees.

The first objective of the study was to investigate whether there is a difference in the understanding of the concept of work engagement between leaders and employees. It was considered relevant to examine the perceptions of employee engagement within the two different groups, with the idea that a difference in understanding of the concept would be a first problem in attempts to promote successful work engagement among MNC employees. However, the results of the research indicate that there is no significant difference in the understanding between the two groups. This means that both leaders and employees of MNC companies have a similar idea of employee work engagement. The latter is shaped by specific elements, described in the current model.

In detail, most of the current findings on work engagement, are consistent with the previous literature. Due to the structure of the questions, respondents recalled all the concepts of vigour, dedication and absorption included in Schaufeli et al.'s (2002) definition. In Figure 3, these three have been replaced by the specific elements that emerged during the interviews. However, some of the current findings are also consistent with Kahn's (1990) definition, such as having a meaningful job. Furthermore, some of the interviewees pointed out that private life can also be an important aspect of commitment, which is in line with the latest review of JD-R theory (Bakker et al., 2023). This means that, although there are some common elements of work engagement, each individual gives its own interpretation to the construct, emphasising some of those aspects. This

confirms that it is not possible to give a single common definition of work engagement, as the concept is strictly dependent on the perception of the individual.

The current analysis considered also the MNC context, which unexpectedly led to significant results. In fact, assessing perceptions of the MNC context was not originally part of this research, so in the interview guidelines (Appendix 1) only one background question was dedicated to that. However, even though it was only an introductory question, this received purposeful answers, that were closely connected to the topics under inquiry. Specifically, respondents identified the main opportunities and challenges of such a context and highlighted their appreciation of the MNC environment. The responses were consistent with the literature review, in that a culturally complex work environment was identified as a barrier to the engagement of MNC employees, while the stimulating work environment and cultural intelligence were identified as drivers. According to the respondents, opportunities overcome the challenges, so the possibility to work in an intercultural environment and participate in international mobility programmes are sources of enthusiasm for MNC employees. Some of them even mentioned the fact of working in a multicultural context, as a source of loyalty to the company, meaning that they stay in the company, also because of the international background.

Hence, a surprising conclusion of this research is that the MNC context is a first source of employee engagement among MNC employees. In fact, during the interviews, the eco of the MNC environment has spread even beyond the first background question, highlighting the idea that work engagement is strictly dependent on MNC contextual factors. This is because, when discussing about their idea of engagement, respondents focused several times their attention on the environment in which they work. Figure 3 summarises all the elements of the MNC context that influence the whole process of engagement creation, and it should be noted that these go beyond the sole opportunities listed in the background question. This is because the relevance of the organisational environment emerged in different forms throughout the interviews, as respondents also mentioned elements such as its intrinsic characteristics and the attitudes of the people

working within it. Thus, apart from specific elements of the job and individual personal factors, people gain their energy and motivation from the organisational context. This means that the engagement of MNC employees is not only a combination of job-related and individual personal factors, but is also highly dependent on the contextual factors of the MNC.

In this scenario, leaders play a crucial role in fostering employee engagement. This is because they actively contribute to creating and supporting the MNC context and to defining employees' work tasks. However, it must also be recognised that they may have less influence on some strictly personal variables. In any case, leaders act through positive leadership and the relationship they have with their subordinates, even if the distinction between the two is not always clear. In fact, positive leadership influences the leader-member relationship, and also vice versa, a good LMX influences leaders' actions. This means that leaders can have both a direct and an indirect influence on the engagement of MNC employees, depending on the individual perception of the concept and the individual relationship with each employee.

Figure 3 highlights four main aspects of positive leadership that current research suggests promoting successful employee engagement among MNC employees. As the “material”, “motivational”, “affective” and “behavioural” pathways of Decuyper and Schaufeli's (2020) model were used as the main for assessing positive leadership, the results are in line with them. However, it should be noted that Figure 3 describes the most relevant aspects that emerged from the research, regardless of a detailed reference to the pathways. This is because the second objective of the study was to have a clear overview of which leader's behaviours impact on engagement. All of the reported behaviours are functional in creating a safe work context and ensuring its stability, as respondents believe that leaders have a background role. Indeed, all respondents agree that employees should be given autonomy in their daily activities, and that the main role of leaders is to support employees when needed by providing resources and personal and professional advice. Leaders also set the tone for the team, which means actively promoting a

positive emotional atmosphere and being a role model for professional practices and company values. However, it should be noted that the type of attitudes and values that the leader represents, depends on the leaders themselves and on the MNCs, but also on the individual employees. This means, that everyone learns something different from their current leader, as evidenced by the diversity of the responses to the related questions.

This type of leader's influence on work engagement also occurs through the relationship they have with their followers. However, it should also be noted that as this is a relationship, leaders have only a partial role in it, which means that LMX also depends on the other counterpart. In any case, for their part, leaders can effectively influence engagement by making an effort to understand their followers and thus tailor the relationship with them. As each employee is different in terms of personality, needs and attitudes, leaders should be aware of these individual aspects and act in a consistent manner. This also means tailoring behaviour and communication to each employee to create a safe working environment where they can discuss freely. As a result, the leader-employee relationship should be characterised by mutual understanding of each other, which is in line with Gutermann et al. (2017), who claimed that a high-quality relationship requires mutual obligations and reciprocity. However, contrary to previous literature (Veestraeten et al., 2021), leaders' expectations of followers do not seem to have an impact on their engagement. According to some respondents, this is because if there is a well-functioning and tailored relationship, the leader does not need to have any further expectations of employees, and even if there are, these do not have any impact on the engagement of MNC employees.

Thus, there is an interrelationship between positive leadership and LMX and their impact on employees' work engagement. For example, the provision of autonomy is associated with interpersonal trust, and similarly, the provision of feedback is associated with communication styles. In any case, it should be noted that the current empirical model (Figure 3) captures an interrelationship, so a two-way process, between LMX and positive

leadership. Such an aspect is a novelty compared to the previous framework (Figure 2), which only described the one-way influence of LMX on positive leadership. This is because the literature generally considers the leader-member exchange as a direct predictor of engagement, or as an influential element of positive leadership. In fact, previous research on leadership and engagement has mainly focused on describing how leader-member exchange affects engagement, or how it affects leadership. However, the current research highlights that there is also an inverse effect, which means that LMX is reciprocally influenced by positive leadership. In other words, LMX and positive leadership influence each other. Thus, the leader-employee relationship actively influences the leader's behaviour, but at the same time, the leader's behaviour can also influence LMX.

From this study, a dynamic process between leaders and MNC employees' work engagement emerges. In fact, leaders influence MNC employees' work engagement, both directly and indirectly through positive leadership and leader-member relationship. Although the concept of work engagement is individual, it is based on common elements linked to the two previous constructs. This is because leaders contribute to the creation of the organisational context and to the design of jobs. However, it should be recognised that engagement also depends on personal variables over which managers have limited control. Each person has a different understanding of engagement, a different personality, different attitudes and therefore different needs. For this reason, to successfully influence the engagement of MNC employees, leaders should know each employee and tailor their behaviour and relationships with each of them. In this way, they can best respond to their needs and help them develop their sense of engagement.

## **5.2 Conclusion**

### **5.2.1 Theoretical and managerial contributions**

The current research contributes at both theoretical and practical levels, in all the three main dimensions of work engagement, leadership and leader-member relationship. At

the theoretical level, a first general contribution is given by the dyadic perspective adopted by the research, as the previous literature is mainly based on the employee's point of view only. Despite the current study does not show significant differences between leaders' and employees' viewpoints, this is still a way to include the leader's perspective in issues that concern them. Specifically on work engagement, the findings are in line with both the theories of Schaufeli et al. (2002) and Kahn (1990), and so this demonstrates that those are not alternatives, but different shades of the same construct. The current research confirms that it is not possible to provide a single definition of work engagement, as the concept is by nature context dependent. Indeed, an unexpected finding of the research, is that the MNC context is a primary source of engagement for MNC employees. This means that work engagement does not depend just on individual and organisational variables, but also on MNC contextual elements.

Theoretical contributions extend to the role of leadership and LMX in enhancing employee engagement in MNCs. First, it should be noted that the most impactful leadership behaviours highlighted in the findings are consistent with the concept of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), rather than transformational leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1994), which is the style most associated with engagement in literature. However, the results show that leaders reveal behaviours relating to different leadership styles. Hence, the thesis confirms the idea that the proliferation of new leadership styles is pointless (Borrmann and Rowold, 2018), as positive leadership styles tend to have the same impact on employee work engagement, regardless of their differences (Decuyper and Schaufeli, 2020). For this reason, the thesis confirms the validity of the positive leadership model, even if it should be noted that it is not surprising that there is evidence for all pathways, as the questions were specifically designed on those (Appendix 1). However, it should be remembered that the purpose of the research was not to assess the validity of the model, which is already a summary of the previous literature, but to extend it with more detailed information. In fact, through the current qualitative study, it has been possible to extend the model of positive leadership, and to provide specific leaders' actions, attitudes and behaviours that enhance engagement. Furthermore, it has been confirmed that

leadership has both a direct and indirect effect on employee engagement, due to the interrelation between positive leadership and the leader-member relationship. As these two influence each other, theoretical contributions also include the impact of LMX on employee work engagement in MNCs. While confirming the dual direct and indirect effect of LMX on employee work engagement, the current research provides some new specific elements that constitute a high quality and effective leader-member relationship. It has been confirmed that the latter should be based on mutual understanding and commitment, but it has also recognised the key role of open communication, caring interpersonal behaviours and underlined that this kind of relationship should be equal and tailored on the individual.

In terms of practical contributions, the research provides both leaders, and MNCs in general, with some suggestions on how to deal with employees in order to foster their engagement. First, it has demonstrated that engaged employees are committed and satisfied with their jobs, and are therefore a resource of the organisation. As the opportunities of the MNC context are a primary source of engagement, companies should encourage the creation of multicultural teams, and promote international mobility. In this way people are part of a dynamic and stimulating working environment, that provides them with challenges and new opportunities for self-development, and therefore gives them energy to do their work, and then be committed to the company. Second, regarding leaders, the study underlines how their role is not to constantly manage people directly all the time, but to support them, set the tone in the team and be an example to follow. In fact, leaders encourage engagement through autonomy, which means allowing people to organise their own work, so not micromanaging them, but at the same time being present, supportive, and giving clear feedback. Leaders also have a role in creating a good atmosphere within the team and in setting an example of the company's values and work ethic. This means that MNCs should invest in leadership development, in the sense of providing leaders with the resources they need to develop themselves as effective leaders.

This is also intrinsically related to the leader-member relationship, in the sense that leaders should be aware of the individual relationships they have with each employee, and tailor it to individual's characteristics. In their supportive role, leaders should also promote the creation of an equal relationship, based on open communication, through which they can effectively collaborate and dialogue with each employee. This means that being a leader means spending time in getting to know people and listening to them. Contextualising this concept in MNCs, this means that there should be careful allocation of leaders to teams. Specifically, regular assessments and feedback sessions about leaders and LMX should be promoted, in order to understand how people work with their manager, and whether the latter is the right person for the team. This is a challenge for MNCs, because of the cultural differences, but if leaders are aware of them and know how to address them by building individual relationships, and using personalised communication styles, then they can successfully engage their employees.

### **5.2.2 Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research**

The current research also has several limitations. The first relates to the topics under investigation: leadership and work engagement are ambiguous concepts, that are intrinsically linked to individual perceptions, and therefore difficult to assess. To overcome this, the interviewees were given the interview guidelines (Appendix 1) in advance, which explained the definition of work engagement and of the related concepts, while the questions on leadership were clarified and reformulated, to ensure that they were correctly understood. These themes are also difficult to assess due to their sensitivity, so to ensure people's freedom to speak, the names of the interviewees and their companies were kept anonymous. Secondly, another limitation is the depth of the analysis on certain topics, such as the factors influencing work engagement or the follower's perspective of the LMX. Specifically, it has been stated that work engagement depends on organisational, contextual and personal factors, but the latter have not been analysed, and similarly the analysis of the leader-follower relationship only considers the leader's behaviour, and not that of the followers. However, this is an inherent part of the research,

in the sense that it was necessary to narrow down the study to a single element, in this case leadership, without considering other variables.

Other limitations of the research include the sample and its qualitative nature. Indeed, conducting a qualitative study means that the sample is limited, so it is not possible to claim full generalisability of the research beyond the current research sample. Conversely, the study was conducted on a limited sample of leaders and employees working in MNCs, in similar industries, and based in the same country. However, there are also limitations to the selection and composition of the sample. For example, employee contacts were collected by leaders, who then knew which people could be included in the study. It would have been more appropriate to contact employees independently, so that the leaders did not know who might be involved. However, due to a lack of contacts, this was not possible to do this, but in any case, it was explained to the employees that participation in the study was voluntary, and that their names and other personal details would not be disclosed. This also explains the different number of employees per team. It would have been better to have the same number of employees per leader, but this was not possible to ensure voluntary participation in the study. As mentioned in the methodology section, cultural differences between the interviewees and the interviewer could also be a limitation, as they may influence the way responses are perceived. However, this problem was addressed by approaching teams based in Finland, a culture with which the author was familiar with, and by asking for follow-up questions when answers were unclear.

However, the limitations, structure and findings of the current thesis, open up new possibilities for future studies. Firstly, the introduction of a dyadic perspective has brought a novelty to the research, providing a broader overview of the topics under investigation. The same goes for the use of a qualitative study, which responded to Wilson's (2023) call, and provided the opportunity to explore new themes, or reunite existing ones coming from fragmented quantitative research. The same applies to the use of a reunited model of leadership, rather than studying individual leadership styles, which Bormann and

Rowold (2018) consider redundant. Therefore, firstly, it can be argued that more qualitative and dyadic studies on work engagement and leadership should be conducted, especially considering the idea of studying leadership styles together, rather than individually. Then, in terms of the time framework, further researchers could conduct longitudinal studies on employee work engagement, inquiring how it might change over time as specific conditions, such as leadership, change. Also, in relation to the dyadic perspective and LMX theory, other studies could simultaneously include the behaviours of leaders and employees, to understand how they influence each other. This is also due to the fact that while there has been extensive research on leadership, followership has only been partially researched, so more studies should be conducted on this topic.

Other possible areas for future research include the influence of cultural differences, the differences of engagement within MNCs, or also the differences in engagement between different years of employment in the same company. The first theme was partially mentioned in this research, but not further analysed because the sample was not as culturally diverse. However, with a more culturally diverse sample, it might be possible to explore this theme more in depth, perhaps also looking at how cultural differences between managers and team members affect their engagement. In this context, it might be also possible to better explore the differences in employee engagement between different subsidiaries of the same MNC, either using a single case study or a broader data sample of several MNCs and their subsidiaries. It could also be noted that this research had a sample of only experienced professionals, as the minimum number of years of employment in the company was 13, so people had already formed their perceptions of the company and their leader. Hence, further research could consider investigating the impact of leadership on new employees, or the differences between them and people who have been with the company longer. In other words, to study the impact of leadership on the work engagement of people with different levels of experience in the organisation.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview Guidelines

The semi-structured interview guidelines are designed for a master's thesis research, which aims to understand how leadership influences employees' work engagement in multinational corporations operating in Finland. The interview is expected to last 1 hour. The introductory and concluding sections are common to both leaders and employees, while the specific section has some questions individually dedicated to employees and some to leaders. The meaning of the questions is always the same, but they are re-phrased according to the type of interviewee.

**Section 1: General background questions** (common questions to both leaders and employees)

A. Demographics

- Age
- Nationality
- Type of job position
- N. years of working experience in the company
- N. years of relationship with the/as a leader

B. MNC Context

- How do you feel working in a multinational company? What are the opportunities and challenges of your daily work in such a context?

**Section 2A: Leader's specific questions** (questions for leaders only)

A. Work engagement

Schaufeli et al. (2002, p. 74) define work engagement as *“a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption”*.

Vigor: high levels of energy and mental resilience, willingness to put effort in the job, and persistence through difficulties.

1. Could you please explain what makes you energetic while working in this company?
2. Could you please explain gives you motivation while working in this company?

Dedication: involvement in the role and feeling of a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge.

3. Could you please explain what makes you feel enthusiastic about your role in this company?

Absorption: full concentration and inclination to the work

4. Could you please explain what keeps you concentrated while working in this company?

### B. Leadership

5. How do you perceive to influence your employees' thinking toward their work in the company?
6. Can you tell a bit about the material resources you provide to facilitate your employees' work?
7. How do you address employees' individual needs? How do you perceive this impacts their motivation?
8. With an example, can you describe how you perceive your emotional state (mood/attitude) affects employees' attitude towards work in the company?
9. What would you say are the most important lessons you have taught to your subordinates in terms of approach to work? Give few examples.

### C. Leader-follower relationship

10. How would you describe the relationship with your followers, with few examples? How does it make you feel?
11. With an example, could you tell how you perceive similarities and differences between you and your employees impact on their way of working?
12. In which ways do you value employees' presence in the company? Provide examples.
13. How do you ensure that your team members understand your expectations of them, and how do you believe this understanding contributes to their motivation?

## **Section 2B: Employees' specific questions (questions for employees only)**

### A. Work engagement

Schaufeli et al. (2002, p. 74) define work engagement as *"a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption"*.

Vigor: high levels of energy and mental resilience, willingness to put effort in the job, and persistence through difficulties.

1. Could you please explain what makes you energetic while working in this company?

2. Could you please explain gives you motivation while working in this company?

Dedication: involvement in the role and feeling of a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge.

3. Could you please explain what makes you feel enthusiastic about your role in this company?

Absorption: full concentration and inclination to the work

4. Could you please explain what keeps you concentrated while working in this company?

### B. Leadership

5. How does your leader shape your perception or thinking toward your work in the company?
6. Can you tell a bit about the available (or lack of) material resources provided to you by your leader to facilitate your work?
7. How does your leader address your individual needs? How does this impact on your motivation?
8. With an example, can you describe how your leader's emotional state (mood/attitude) affects your attitude towards work in the company?
9. What would you say are the most important lessons you have learned from your manager in terms of approach to work? Give few examples.

### C. Leader-follower relationship

10. How would you describe the relationship with your leader, with few examples? How does it make you feel?
11. With an example, could you tell how similarities and differences between you and your leader impact on your way of working?
12. In which ways does your supervisor value your presence in the company? Provide examples.
13. What understanding do you have of your leaders' expectations of you, and how do you believe this understanding contributes to your motivation?

**Section 3: Further questions & clarifications** (common questions to both leaders and employees)

14. In your opinion, what could be improved to increase work engagement?
15. Any additional thoughts you would like to share about the discussed topics?

(if needed clarifications)

**Thank you for your time!**