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The Heart of Leadership

An empirical investigation into empathy and its impact on effective leadership

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"Leadership is not about being in charge.

It is about taking care of those in your charge."

— Simon Sinek

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Introduction

Leadership has always been an interesting topic. It involves the crossroads between power and purpose. Leaders have the ability to positively or negatively affect the destiny of an organization or even a country.

Whether in the form of charismatic historical figures or modern-day CEO or president, the nature of leadership has been explored, observed, argued, and written about for many years. But what really makes a great leader? Is the charisma that attracts followers? Is the strategic mind that deals with complexity? Or is it something deeper, something innate, that separates the great leaders from everyone else?

The Heart of Leadership, this thesis, ventures into this rich world, proposing that empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, is the beating heart of a true leader.

Empathy, once associate exclusively to the sphere of emotional intelligence and soft skills, has become increasingly identified as a key factor in effective leadership today. In a world where organizations face the challenges of rapidly changing global conditions, leaders have to deal with not just the technical and operational aspects of their positions, but also the intricate human issues that shape their employees and stakeholders. The ability to get inside other

people's minds and understand their feelings, it's been indispensable in fostering trust, inspiring participation and encouraging creativity.

This thesis is based on both existing theoretical concepts and empirical studies, derived from a specially designed questionnaire and a series of Behavioural Event Interviews (BEI's) with leaders from different types of organizations. These tools were useful in capturing how empathy is displayed in terms of leadership practices and how it affects the organization and its outcomes. The survey helped me to quantify how often empathetic behaviours occurred and their effectiveness, while the BEIs provided a narrative picture of leaders' experiences in using empathy to make decisions and deal with others.

In the past, a leader was mainly seen as someone who dominated. According to the Great Man Theory, leaders are born with innate characteristics, making them different. This deterministic perspective did not take the relational and situational nature of leadership into consideration. Later in time, behavioural and contingency theories introduced the notion that leadership could be learned and that acts could define leaders, not only traits. However, even those models rarely considered the true influence of emotional intelligence, especially empathy, on a leader's results.

Therefore, one key question arises: is empathy, a historically undervalued characteristic in leaders, one of the elements that convert leadership from good to great? In a world where transactional models of leadership have been replaced by transformational and servant leadership, empathy is essential. Empathetic leaders can better understand the difficulties faced by their team, encourage an environment of inclusivity and inspire their collaborators to be loyal and committed.

However, on a practical level, what does lead with empathy mean? In what ways can leaders develop this sense of empathy in a manner that allows them to be successful internally without sacrificing the good of the organization?

This thesis aims to answer these questions by exploring the relationship between empathy and leadership. The study examines the role of empathy in influencing different aspects of leadership: decision making, conflict resolution, motivation, communication, and evaluate its effect on organizational performance and employees' well-being.

The decision to explore empathy and leadership in this thesis was born from a personal interest for understanding human dynamics and a deeply rooted belief in the power of empathy. Throughout my academic and career experiences, I have seen the impact of empathetic leaders in creating environments where people feel appreciated, inspired, and encouraged to reach their full potential.

In an era where technology and globalization are making extraordinary leaps and bounds, the importance of the human element sometimes is ignored, transferred across international borders, or hidden behind statistics and surveys. However, many studies and real-world cases have proved that companies with empathetic leaders have higher employee satisfaction, less turnover and improve creativity and innovation. Empathy is not only a moral need but also a strategic advantage in today's complex and competitive world.

This thesis has several goals. It first aims to provide an exhaustive examination of how empathy plays a role in leadership by consolidating previous research and also suggesting new insights about its effects. Secondly, it seeks to close the gap between theory and practice by recommending practical ideas for cultivating empathetic leadership. This work serves as a contribution to the overall discussion of the topic by promoting a more humanistic leadership that combines the development of emotions and logic skills with all the other factors that enhance leadership effectiveness.

In conclusion, at its core, *The Heart of Leadership* serves as a call to action for leaders to use empathy as a core value of their leadership style. It is an invitation to travel beyond the transactional and into the transformational, where leadership is constructed as an act of service, connection and humanity. This thesis attempts to prove that in the ever-evolving scenery of leadership, the heart is as important as the head, and empathy is one of the keys to unlock its full potential.

Chapter I

LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Leadership: definition, theories and relevance.

For decades leadership has been an important topic of research across various disciplines and remains one of the most debated and multifaceted concepts in both academic and practical studies, from psychology to organizational and management, with numerous definitions and theories developed to understand its dynamics and effects.

Historically, perspectives on leadership ranged from Aristotle's emphasis on wisdom to Machiavelli's focus on cunning. Modern theories shift from identifying leadership as an innate trait to understanding it as a learned skill, rooted in the enduring "nature versus nurture" debate. Trait theories, as advanced by scholars like Stogdill (1948), highlight specific characteristics such as intelligence and sociability but emphasize that these must align with the needs of followers and situational demands. This critique paved the way for behavioural theories, which categorize leadership into styles such as authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire, each varying in effectiveness based on group dynamics and context (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). Situational theories further refined this understanding by exploring how

leadership adapts to environmental conditions. Fiedler's Contingency Model (1967), for instance, posits that task-oriented leaders excel in highly favourable or unfavourable conditions, whereas relationship-oriented leaders perform best in moderate contexts. Similarly, Hersey and Blanchard (1972) proposed a model where leadership evolves with follower maturity, transitioning from directive to collaborative approaches. Modern critiques argue that advancements in communication and education have reduced the need for centralized leadership; however, the human tendency to move toward power and influence emphasises the relevance of leadership in all organizational settings. Leadership power, as categorized by French and Raven (1959), including legitimate, coercive, and referent power, remains central to how leaders navigate and influence their environments effectively. This evolving discourse highlights leadership as a dynamic interplay of traits, behaviours, and situational adaptability, reflecting its complexity and critical importance in achieving organizational success.

1.1.1. Definition of leadership.

As I already mentioned, the literature offers different perspectives on leadership; while examining the varied conceptualizations, difficulties emerge and designating one univocal definition becomes challenging. Concerning this, in 1991 the sociologist Rost analysed papers written between 1900 and 1991 and found 221 definitions of leadership (Northouse, 2018).

The notion of leadership has been studied for centuries and its origin dates back to the ancient civilization when the leaders were often monarchs, religious figures and military commanders. Early leadership was associated to power, control and dominance. However, across the centuries, the concept of leadership has evolved to include different aspects such as behaviour, relationships and emotional intelligence.

Scholar Gary Yukl's definition (2013), is widely referenced and respected for its comprehensive and practical approach: "*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.*" (Yukl, 2013). This definition seems effective since it highlights both the influence aspect of leadership and the importance of shared goals, key points of the modern leadership.

As a matter of fact, this suggest that leadership today is both about influencing and guiding a group of individuals and helping them work toward a common purpose (Northouse, 2018); it is seen as a relational process that involves collaboration, listening, and creating trust among team members (Goleman, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

1.1.2. Leadership theories.

As anticipated, over the years leadership has evolved in its conception. It becomes relevant to make a short historical excursus that allows to understand and investigate the theories and aspects of the topic.

One of the earliest leadership theories is the Great Man Theory, which emerged in the 19th century thanks to Thomas Carlyle (1841):

> "No great man lives in vain. The history of the world is but the biography of great men."
>
> - Thomas Carlyle

This theory addresses the question of nature versus nurture, which explores whether individuals become who they are mainly due to inherent and genetic traits, or as a result of external influences like education, surrounding environment, society and life experiences that shape their development after birth (Carlyle, 1841). The Great Man Theory suggested that leaders are born, and not made, implying that they have innate qualities attributed to divine inspiration or military power that make them successful, such as intelligence, confidence, and charisma. Leadership qualities are something that only a few people have. These individuals, often seen as heroic figures, possess certain intrinsic traits that make them natural leaders in any situation (Galton, 1869).

Historical figures such as Napoleon Bonaparte, Abraham Lincoln and Indira Gandhi were examined (Northouse, 2019), asserting that these and other great men were inherently exceptional individuals, destined to have a profound impact on and influence large masses of people (Carlyle, 1841; Northouse, 2019).

However, one question arises: can leadership truly be reduced to some innate traits, or is there more to becoming a leader than just being born with the right qualities?

Modern leadership studies have criticized the Great Man Theory for being overly simplistic and not based on empirical research. The theory assumes that leadership is a function of inherent traits, rather than learned skills or situational factors. Nevertheless, the individuals referenced in the theory and previously mentioned were not directly observed during its formulation, making it impossible to confirm whether they actually displayed the traits described; it cannot be definitively proven whether these traits were responsible for their leadership success, or if other external factors played a role. Additionally, the theory is difficult to apply in an organizational context. Since it claims that leaders are born with certain traits, it implies that organizations should only hire individuals who naturally exhibit these characteristics. This poses significant challenges when applied to organizations, which require multiple leaders at various levels of the hierarchy (Northouse, 2019). Furthermore, the theory focuses heavily on male leaders, often excluding women and people from less privileged backgrounds. It assumes that only certain “great men” can lead, ignoring the potential for others to develop leadership skills.

As leadership studies advanced, theories moved away from the idea of “great men” and toward understanding the specific traits and behaviours that make effective leaders. This gave rise to the Trait Theory, which focuses on specific characteristics, and later to Behavioural Theories which focus on actions and learned leadership skills.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Trait Theory establishes that some individuals own genetic characteristics or traits, such as self-confidence, charisma, intelligence, determination, integrity and sociability, that boost the chances of becoming effective leaders. The theory is constructed on the belief that leadership is mainly based on personal qualities which divide leaders and non-leaders.

While it is related to the Great Man Theory, the Trait Theory affirms that specific characteristics can be connected, measured, and possibly developed, rather than presuming that leadership is innate and only found in a few exceptional individuals: leadership is not exclusively inborn but related to the personality and the qualities of individuals; different situations perhaps require different traits, making it more flexible than the Great Man Theory.

One of the most notable early studies was conducted by Ralph Stogdill (1948), who, between 1904 and 1947, reviewed more than 124 studies on leadership traits across 27 groups of factors (Northouse, 2019) and note that simply possessing certain traits does not automatically make someone an effective leader. He argued that a leader's traits must be aligned with the demands of the leadership context, including the specific challenges at hand and the abilities, aspirations, values, and concerns of the follower.

Stogdill concluded that no single set of traits universally applied to all effective leaders, but that leadership traits must be considered in context (Stogdill, 1948). Therefore, it seems plausible to consider that a person with leadership traits might lead successfully in one situation but not in another. Leadership was redefined not as a fixed quality that individuals inherently possess, but as a relationship between people within a social context (Northouse, 2019).

Mann (1959) examined over 1400 studies on personality and leadership in small groups, suggesting that personality traits could distinguish leaders from non-leaders, highlighting six key traits: intelligence, masculinity, adjustment, dominance, extraversion, and conservatism. Lord et al. (1986) later reassessed Mann's findings using meta-analysis and confirmed that intelligence, masculinity, and dominance were significantly linked to perceptions of leaders, arguing that personality traits consistently differentiate leaders across various situations. Both studies occurred during a time when male leadership predominated in American society. Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) further supported the significance of leadership traits, asserting that leaders differ from non-leaders in six traits: drive, motivation, integrity, confidence, cognitive ability, and task knowledge. They noted that these traits can be innate, learned, or both, emphasizing that these qualities are crucial to effective leadership (Northouse, 2019).

The 1990s saw a shift from measuring “emotional intelligence” to measuring “social intelligence”, which was defined as the ability to understand both your own and others' emotions, and to respond appropriately (Marlowe, 1986). According to Zaccaro (2002), social awareness, self-monitoring, and social intelligence are critical individual differences associated with effective leadership. Zaccaro, Kemp and Bader (2004) identified social skills as critical components of leadership (Northhouse, 2019).

The range of leadership-associated traits are summarized in Table 1. Although many characteristics often appear in studies, others are less stable. However, this table shows a common agreement on the characteristics associated with leadership (Northouse, 2019).

Table 1. Studies of Leadership Traits and Characteristics (Northouse, 2019)

Stogdill (1948)	Mann (1959)	Stogdill (1974)	Lord, DeVader, and Alliger (1986)	Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991)	Zaccaro, Kemp, and Bader (2004)
Intelligence	Intelligence	Achievement	Intelligence	Drive	Cognitive abilities
Alertness	Masculinity	Persistence	Masculinity	Motivation	Extroversion
Insight	Adjustment	Insight	Dominance	Integrity	Conscientiousness
Responsibility	Dominance	Initiative		Confidence	Emotional stability
Initiative	Extroversion	Self-confidence		Cognitive ability	Openness
Persistence	Conservatism	Responsibility		Task knowledge	Agreeableness
Self-confidence		Cooperativeness			Motivation
Sociability		Tolerance			Social intelligence
		Influence			Self-monitoring
		Sociability			Emotional intelligence
					Problem solving

SOURCES: Adapted from "The Bases of Social Power," by J. R. P. French, Jr. and B. Raven, 1962, in D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory* (pp. 259–269), New York: Harper and Row; Zaccoro, Kemp, & Bader (2004).

Researchers aimed to identify which characteristics, such as assertiveness, decision-making ability and emotional stability, were common among successful leaders. The Big Five Personality Traits (OCEAN: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism) are often used in modern leadership studies to examine how personality influences leadership effectiveness (Judge, et al., 2002).

However, Trait Theory has come under criticism as it lacks universality and does not sufficiently account for the leadership effectiveness in various situation and contexts. Some studies have indicated that there is no one combination of characteristic traits that can determine success in every leadership situation. Although it initially emphasized the commonalities among characteristics, more modern research holds that leadership situations may demand different qualities (Stogdill, 1974). As a consequence, the one-size-fits-all approach to leadership moved away to make this new understanding giving rise to the contingency and situational theories of leadership, which recognize the role of context, as will be explained below.

The Behavioural Theory is a school of thought which assesses that leadership is based on learned behaviours rather than on inherent traits or characteristics as earlier theories proposed. It raised as a response to the limitations of those previous theories. Does this mean that anyone, with the right guidance and commitment, has the potential to lead? Behavioural theory points out that leaders can be trained or developed based on their actions rather than

relying on personal attributes. Therefore, the theory affirms that anyone can become a leader by learning and improving the right set of behaviours through education and practice, and it focuses on what leaders do rather than what leaders are.

Scholars found two main types of leadership behaviours:

- Task-oriented leadership - focused on the achievement of tasks and goals. These leaders emphasize efficiency, structure, and getting work done.
- People-oriented leadership – characterized by the emphasis on building relationships, developing team cohesion, and ensuring the well-being of team members.

Following the Ohio State Studies, between the 1940s and the 1950s, leadership's focus moved from inherent traits, as seen in the Great Man and Trait theories, to observable behaviours. The aim was to distinguish the specific behaviours that contributed to effective leadership rather than assuming that leaders were born with certain innate qualities.

The research began at Ohio State University in the late 1940s under the leadership of Ralph Stogdill and other scholars. They sought to explore whether certain leadership behaviours were universally effective, regardless of the situation. The key focus was to identify behaviours that distinguished effective leaders from ineffective ones (Northouse, 2019). With this objective, the researchers create a tool called Leader Behaviour Description Questionnaire (LBDQ). This screener was created to measure how followers viewed their leaders' behaviours. Lindberg (2022) sent the LBDQ to employees of different organizations (military, schools, industries, etc.) and requested that they rate their leaders' behaviours.

The Ohio State Studies revealed two primary dimensions of leadership behaviour: "initiating structure", that refers to the leader's focus on task achievement and role structure, and "consideration", the leader's emphasis on relationships, trust-building, and concern for employees' well-being (Fleishman, 1953). These two dimensions were found to be independent of each other, they are not mutually exclusive: a leader could be high or low in both dimensions, or high in one and low in the other. This contradict the idea that leadership was a single-dimensional construct. Leaders could exhibit different combinations of these two behaviours, which influenced their effectiveness in various situations (Fleishman, 1953).

The Leader Behaviour Description Questionnaire includes 150 statements about leadership behaviours. Respondents indicate how often each behaviour is exhibited, using a five-point

scale ranging from never to always. This questionnaire allows for the systematic analysis and quantification of leadership research (Lindberg, 2022) and described how subordinates rated their leaders on both dimensions of consideration and initiating structure (Fleishman, 1953).

The Ohio State Studies put the basis for future research on leadership behaviours, influencing subsequent theories such as Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid and Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory. However, the Ohio State Studies largely ignored the role of the external environment and the specific challenges faced by leaders. Later researchers pointed out that the same behaviours might not work in all situations, which, through time, will lead to the rise of Fiedler's Contingency Model of Leadership. Furthermore, some argued that leadership is more complex than just two dimensions and that a variety of other factors play a role (Lindberg, 2022).

In the 1950s, the University of Michigan Studies where one of the major contributors of behavioural leadership. Studies done by Rensis Likert (1961) tried to make out leadership behaviours that could lead to more productivity and job satisfaction by assessing how leaders could interact with their subjects in different workplaces.

Two primary types of leadership behaviours were identified:

- Employee-oriented leadership - this style emphasized interpersonal relationships and the consideration of employees' personal needs. Leaders who adopted this style were concerned with their followers' welfare, fostering a supportive and trusting work environment. These leaders were seen as focusing on individual development and building strong relationships. The studies showed that this leadership style led to greater employee satisfaction, motivation, and higher overall productivity (Likert, 1961).
- Production-oriented leadership - in contrast, this leadership style prioritized the achievement of tasks and organizational goals. Leaders of this type placed more emphasis on technical or task aspects rather than the personal needs of their followers. Although effective in driving short-term productivity, production-oriented leadership was associated with lower employee morale and job satisfaction (Katz & Kahn, 1952).

The University of Michigan studies found out that employee-oriented leadership usually lead to better long-term outcomes, including higher employee morale, greater job satisfaction, and

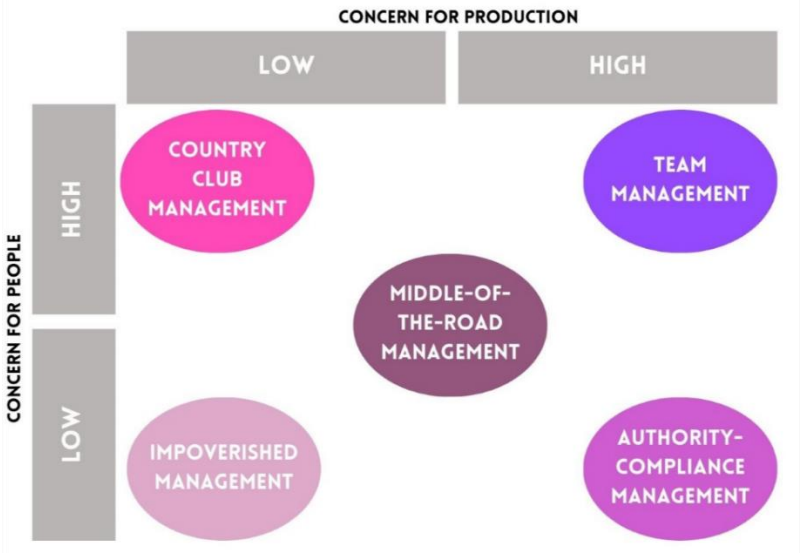
improved productivity. Katz and Kahn (1952) contributed to this by enhancing that employee-oriented leadership had a positive impact on work outcomes, compared to production-oriented leadership, which had more short-term benefits but risked lower satisfaction.

These findings influenced later leadership theories, including Likert's System Management theory, which advocated for more participative, employee-centred leadership as the most effective approach for fostering high-performing teams (Likert, 1961).

The studies mainly concluded that by decreasing the direct pressure and control a leader has over a follower, the follower's performance and engagement would increase. However, these results have been challenged in respect of their methodology and outcomes. They did not take into consideration the context of followers, leaders or tasks; in other words, not all leadership styles may be fit for every organization. On the other hand, the focus of the studies captures the inability of only one specific leadership style to be effective at all organizations, or in every given situation. Different leadership styles do not work equally well in different companies, because of other variables affecting the outcome: leaders change style over time or adjust to certain needs of a situation, rather than following a fixed, unchanging method (Kenton, 2022).

In 1964, Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid (Image 1), was designed to analyse leadership styles considering two key dimensions: concern for people and concern for production (Blake & Mouton, 1964). This model helps identify how leaders balance the need to prioritize the well-being of their team members and achieving organizational goals.

Image 1. Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid (in myorganisationalbehaviour.com)



The grid defines five distinct leadership styles, each representing a different combination of these concerns:

1. Impoverished management (1,1 - low people, low production) - leaders adopting this style show minimal concern for both people and production. Blake and Mouton describe these leaders as disengaged, avoiding responsibilities and neglecting both employee needs and organizational goals. The focus here is purely on survival and maintaining the status quo without ambition for progress.
2. Country club management (1,9 - high people, low production) - this style focuses on employee well-being while putting little importance on achieving business objectives. According to the scholars, leaders in this category create a supportive and friendly work environment, but their lack of focus on performance can influence productivity. The emphasis is on keeping the team feel comfortable, with the risk of not fulfilling organizational success.
3. Authority-compliance management (9,1 - low people, high production) - leaders are hardly concerned with the people aspect of the organisation. In contrast, Blake and Mouton describe these leaders as the ones who concern less for followers' well-being and use strict and more autocratic controls as the main means of reaching objectives. This can boost output and productivity but usually damages team morale and engagement.
4. Middle-of-the-road management (5,5 - moderate people, moderate production) - leaders in this category attempt to find a balance between people and production but may not excel in either. The authors highlight that these leaders seek compromise, resulting in moderate performance and adequate employee satisfaction. However, this approach can often lead to mediocrity since neither goal is fully prioritized.
5. Team management (9,9 – high people, high production) - scholars assume that this type of leadership is the best most adequate as it balances ideal organization with regard to people and production. Leaders implement a collaborative, high-performing environment.

Organizations use the Managerial Grid for various reasons. It is a guide for developing leaders' styles, evaluate them and work to improve and evolve their skills. It helps refining team

dynamics and how organizations' leadership styles can operate within their groups to work more effectively. The grid is part of decision-making: it helps leaders to strike a balance between the concern of people and concern of tasks. Furthermore, the grid assists in conflict avoidance and resolution and in the choice of the most appropriate training programs. It is also used for guiding and reshaping of organizational culture by evaluating the prevailing leadership style and ensuring that it supports the strategic objectives of the company. Additionally, the Managerial Grid is associated with performance management systems as it aids in evaluating leaders and providing feedback. It enhances change management by determining whether leaders would be able to adapt to change when the need arises during times of transition. The grid also supports leaders in embracing diversity and inclusion by making them aware of their leadership styles and adapting them to manage diverse teams (in myorganisationalbehaviour.com).

However, the Managerial Grid has relevant limitations: it tends to oversimplify complex leadership behaviours by reducing them to two dimensions, overlooking other variables and situational factors that are significant in real-world leadership. Additionally, critics state that the model lacks strong empirical support; this raises questions about its assumptions regarding the relationship between the two axes and leadership effectiveness. The focus on extremes within the grid may also undervalue the more flexible approaches that leaders often need to adopt. Moreover, the grid is considered static, as it assumes that leadership style is fixed, ignoring the adaptability many leaders demonstrate in response to different team needs or situations. Its foundation in Western corporate culture further limits its applicability in other cultural contexts where leadership expectations differ. The model also neglects other key leadership traits, such as emotional intelligence and strategic thinking and focuses primarily on concern for people and production. Finally, it lacks predictive power in terms of determining the effectiveness of these styles across different organizational environments (in myorganisationalbehaviour.com).

The Behavioural Theory of leadership illustrates that effective leadership can be trained by adopting specific behaviours, making, as a consequence, leadership skills easier to learn. A major disadvantage, however, is that it gives no attention to the situational variables; it suggests that specific behaviours will work in all situations when effective leadership tends to need adjustment to particular contexts and situations. Moreover, an exclusive behaviour-centric

approach may minimize leadership by failing to consider the impact of emotional and interpersonal factors, as well as external contingencies.

Fiedler's Contingency Theory (1967) contradicts the Behavioural Theory stating that there isn't a defined set of behaviours that a good leader possesses but rather that the effectiveness of a leader depends on whether their style of leadership matches the demands of the situation. Likewise, the Path-Goal Theory by House (1971) requires leaders to adapt their behaviour according to followers' needs and the organizational context.

In conclusion, while Behavioural Theory represented a significant progress by shifting the focus from inherent traits to learnable behaviours, its neglect of situational factors led to the development of more comprehensive theories, such as contingency and situational leadership models, which address the complexity of leadership in different contexts.

Contingency and Situational Leadership Theories (1960s-1970s) expanded on the limitations of earlier leadership models, particularly the Trait and Behavioural Theories, by emphasizing that leadership effectiveness depends on the context in which it occurs. These theories argue that no single leadership style is universally effective; rather, the leader's behaviour must be adapted to the specific circumstances, tasks and followers (Simms, 2023).

Fiedler's Contingency Theory (1967) was one of the earliest and most influential models in this area (Bhandari, 2023). Fiedler suggested that a leader's effectiveness is contingent upon how well their leadership style matches the demands of the situation (Fiedler, 1967). Fiedler classified leadership styles as either task-oriented or relationship-oriented, measured using the "Least Preferred Co-worker" (LPC) scale. Task-oriented leaders focus on achieving goals, while relationship-oriented leaders emphasize building interpersonal relationships. Fiedler argued that task-oriented leaders perform better in situations of high or low control, while relationship-oriented leaders excel in moderately controlled environments (Fiedler, 1967). The theory implies that leaders cannot easily change their inherent style, so organizations must adjust leadership roles to fit the situation. This marked a shift from the idea that leaders could universally adapt to any context.

Another influential model was introduced by Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory (1977), proposing that effective leadership depends on the leader's ability to adjust their style to the maturity and competence of their followers. This theory suggested that leadership requires flexibility and that leaders must assess the readiness level of their

employees, ranging from low to high competence and commitment, and apply the appropriate leadership style. The model presents four leadership styles: directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating. For example, a leader should use a directive style when followers have low competence but high commitment, but as followers become more skilled and self-reliant, leaders should shift to a more supportive or delegative approach (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977).

Vroom-Yetton Decision Model (1973) added an important dimension: the leader's method of decision-making has to be tailored to the context. Vroom and Yetton argue that a leader can only be successful if the level of decision he/she is making is either autocratic, consultative, or group-based process. The model has a decision tree type of approach that can guide leaders through analysing the situation and choosing the correct style (Vroom & Yetton, 1973).

According to the House's Path-Goal Theory (1971) leadership effectiveness also depends on how well a leader clarifies the path for their subordinates to achieve goals. The theory suggests that leaders should adapt their behaviour based on followers' needs and the work environment. Leaders are seen as facilitators, clearing obstacles and providing direction to help subordinates achieve desired outcomes. This theory highlighted the importance of situational flexibility in leadership styles and placed emphasis on leaders adapting their behaviour to fit the needs of their followers (House, 1971).

Two of the most prominent leadership theories, transactional and transformational leadership, have been dominant since the late 1980s (Syarifuddin & Haerani, 2024). Research on transactional and transformational leadership has gained significant attention in the last decades. These models were introduced by scholars seeking to better understand how leaders influence followers and achieve organizational success. Some researchers argue that these leadership styles are similar, while others believe they are distinct (Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013). Transactional leadership is based on a system of rewards and punishments, where leaders motivate followers by setting clear goals and providing rewards for achieving those goals or penalties for failing to meet them. Transactional leaders focus on short-term tasks, maintaining the status quo, and ensuring that their subordinates comply with established procedures (Cherry, 2022). They operate primarily through structured, routine exchanges and agreements between them and the followers.

The notion of transformational and transactional leadership was first introduced by James MacGregor Burns (1978) in the context of political leadership and was further elaborated and

expanded to other contexts by Bernard M. Bass (1985). Transactional leaders, the more managerial and task-oriented type of leaders, are concerned with performance, compliance, and organizational standards and rules (Burns, 1978; Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013). They primarily engage in two strategies: contingent rewards, rewarding his followers for reaching particular performance levels; and management by exception, correcting or punishing his followers when they stray from the expected path.

Bass (1985) expanded on Burns' theory by identifying two forms of transactional leadership:

- Active management by exception, where leaders actively monitor the work of subordinates and intervene before problems arise.
- Passive management by exception, where leaders intervene only after problems become significant.

Although transactional leadership is effective for maintaining operational efficiency and achieving immediate objectives, critics argue that it may limit creativity and not foster long-term motivation or followers' personal growth.

In contrast, transformational leadership involves more than just reward and punishment. Transformational leaders garner respect, inspire, motivate, and intellectually stimulate followers to prioritize the organization (Kevi & Djonekos, 2018). For instance, transformational leadership is a style in which leaders and followers mutually elevate one another to higher levels of motivation and morality (Burns, 1978). Unlike transactional leaders, transformational leaders focus on change, innovation, and a long-term outlook.

Transformational leadership theory was elaborated by Bass (1985), who first proposed that leaders provide followers with a vision of the future that is appealingly different from the status quo. He called the four components of transformational leadership the "Four I's":

1. Idealized influence - leaders act as role models, demonstrating high ethical standards and earning the trust and respect of their followers (Eikenberry, 2024).
2. Inspirational motivation - leaders define a clear and compelling vision, motivating followers to commit to the organization's mission.

3. Intellectual stimulation - leaders inspire creative votes for ideas, challenging their followers to utilize their critical faculties and the potentials of new techniques needed for the solving of problems (Eikenberry, 2024).
4. Individualized consideration - leaders offer personal attention, advice and support in the development of each follower.

Bass's model emphasized that transformational leaders do more than just ensure tasks are completed; they foster an environment where followers can grow, innovate and contribute beyond what is expected from them. Transformational leaders not only motivate their followers but also help them achieve higher levels of personal development and performance; transformational leadership has been particularly effective in times of change or crisis, where innovation and adaptability are crucial (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Although most scholars agree that transactional and transformational leadership are different in concept, many believe that transformational leadership enhances transactional leadership, leading to better individual, group and organizational outcomes (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Howell & Avolio, 1993; Lowe et al., 1996). Some even view transactional leadership as a subset of transformational leadership (Weihrich et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, transformational leadership is not without its limitations. A number of weak points have been identified by Yukl (1999): for example, it does not provide specific explanation of the processes that occur at either group or organizational level to achieve beneficial outcomes (Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013). Moreover, the model sometimes fails to account for situational variables that impact the result of leadership. Bass (1996) determines that transformational leadership is universally effective; there is considerable evidence that situational factors such as environmental stability and organizational culture are important determinants of effectiveness as well (Yukl, 1999). Furthermore, transformational leadership may occasionally have negative effects: overemphasis can lead to emotional burnout among followers, excessive dependency on the leader or even manipulation if not applied ethically. (Yukl, 1999; Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013).

Both Transactional and Transformational leadership theories attempt to explain leadership's nature and effects: transformational leadership has gained popularity and is associated with positive work outcomes like higher productivity and employee satisfaction (Rubin et al., 2005;

Judge & Bono, 2000; Eisenbeiß & Boerner, 2013), however more empirical research is needed to fully understand the dynamics of both leadership styles (Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013).

In recent years, ethical scandals involving major corporations like Enron and WorldCom have driven a heightened focus on leadership approaches that emphasize ethical and moral behaviour. These values-based leadership forms include ethical, authentic and servant leadership. They have gained significant scholarly attention as responses to corporate misconduct linked to unethical leadership, which has led to calls for more ethical approaches compared to existing transformational leadership. They offer people-centred approaches to leadership that emphasize ethical considerations and leaders' genuine, supportive interactions with followers. Each theory suggests that a leader's focus on values, sincerity and commitment to others promotes an environment where employees can grow, contributing to personal, team and organizational success (Hoch, et al., 2016). Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) distinguished between authentic and pseudo-transformational leadership, emphasizing authenticity as crucial to effective, ethical leadership. Authentic leadership, introduced by Luthans and Avolio (2003), involves leaders who are morally grounded, self-aware, transparent and focused on both personal and follower development, focusing on leaders who remain true to their values. Authentic leadership gained popularity with scholars such as Bill George (2003) who suggested that authentic leaders are purpose-driven and value-driven and act consistently and ethically, making followers trust and engage with them. According to George, the four basic components of authentic leadership are self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing and internalized moral perspective (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Thus, authentic leaders are highly self-aware, transparent and free from any bias while making decisions. This transparent manner establishes credibility since followers can identify and value leaders who operate in accordance with their stated values and beliefs (George 2003). Moreover, authenticity, moral and ethical integrity, facets of authentic leadership, enhance workplace culture. Similarly, Walumbwa et al. (2008) created and validated a measure of authentic leadership, which led to the broader acceptance of authentic leadership as a topic worthy of scholarly attention. Research has shown that authentic leadership has a positive influence on job satisfaction, team climate and team performance, especially because employees feel respected and appreciated by leaders who are perceived as authentic and core-value based (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Servant, transformational, ethical and other positive forms of leadership are based on authentic leadership (Hoch, et al., 2016).

Servant leadership, developed by Greenleaf (1970), promotes the idea that true leaders are servants first who focus on prioritizing followers' needs, supporting their growth and fostering a community-oriented environment. Servant leaders show qualities such as empathy, listening, stewardship and a commitment to followers' growth. Greenleaf described servant leaders as people who focus on the development and well-being of their followers, rather than seeking control or recognition (Hoch, et al., 2016). Building on Greenleaf's foundation, Larry Spears (1998) further elaborated on servant leadership's core attributes and identified elements such as healing, persuasion and building community as essential qualities of servant leadership. Spears emphasized that servant leaders inspire and empower employees by demonstrating ethical and authentic actions, fostering an environment of mutual trust and support (Spears, 1998). Research has shown positive outcomes of servant leadership in both individual and organizational contexts. Liden et al. (2008), for example, found that servant leadership improves job satisfaction, commitment and loyalty among followers, suggesting that when employees feel genuinely valued and supported, they are more likely to contribute to their organization's success. Eva et al. (2019) further emphasized servant leadership's benefits, noting that it enhances team performance and fosters a culture of continuous improvement.

Ethical leadership, as defined by Brown et al. (2005), recognizes leaders in the role of moral voice, articulating and advocating ethical values through transparency in communication, integrity and decision making. Drawing from social learning theory, ethical leadership cultivates and promotes ethical behaviour of followers through observation of the behaviour of the leader (Hoch, et al., 2016).

Studies, including meta-analyses, have examined how these values-based forms correlate with organizational factors like commitment, trust, and performance. Recent research aims to test whether ethical, authentic and servant leadership models add predictive validity beyond transformational leadership (Hoch, et al., 2016).

During the 2000s, emotional leadership and empathy became popular in the leadership field: they focus on leaders that are able to recognize and react to their and other people's emotions to improve morale, team cohesion and productivity. Emotional leadership, the capacity of leaders to manage their own feelings and those of the team members, facilitates improved communication and relationships. Goleman's work (2000) brought to the forefront this interest in bringing emotional intelligence into leadership. He recognized five key elements of emotional intelligence that leaders should possess: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy

and social skills, and argued that leaders who are strong in those five elements are more effective at motivating people, negotiating conflict and gaining trust among collaborators.

Empathy is considered one of the foundational skills for emotional leadership; it enables leaders to put themselves in others' positions and understand their experiences and feelings, which, in turn, helps build loyalty and trust. This empathetic approach contrasts with transactional styles that may prioritize tasks and goals over relationships, making empathy a core characteristic of a transformational approach to leadership. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) highlighted that leaders who exhibit empathy tend to foster more engaged, creative, and resilient teams, with positive effects on organizational culture as employees feel valued and understood. Their research found that empathy in leadership reduces stress and increases overall team performance and satisfaction, which also improves long-term organizational success (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

Furthermore, evidence suggests that emotional leadership is beneficial also in environments characterized by stress and worry. For instance, Barsade and O'Neill (2016) found that leaders intentionally create positive emotional climates that lead to positive change in engagement and reduction in team burnout rates. In this way leaders foster higher levels of motivation and resilience in the team leading to higher performance (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016).

As a recent evolution in leadership studies, the empathy and emotional leadership approach emphasize the importance of emotional dynamics in achieving organizational objectives. Their impact has redefined effective leadership by highlighting the critical role of interpersonal understanding and emotional awareness in modern leadership success.

1.1.3. Leadership relevance.

Leadership has a profound impact on defining organizations and societies, influencing events of national importance and human lives.

Customer Relationship Management is one of the indispensable components of management which impacts on the functioning and the growth of organizations. Strategic leadership is not only important to motivate staff, unite teams and manage the achievement of large-scale goals based on inspiration and participation; it also plays a role in market competition and public image. Weihrich et al. (2008) stated that leadership has a significant influence on both the

culture and resilience of organizations, which are crucial for their well-being. By inspiring vision and motivating individuals, leaders are essential in guiding companies and governments towards growth, stability and high performance, while also fostering an environment that encourages innovation and collaboration.

The impact of leadership is particularly evident in historical and contemporary examples where strong leaders have transformed failing organizations into industry giants. For instance, Jack Welch's leadership at General Electric and Lee Iacocca's at Chrysler are often cited as exemplary cases where effective leadership catalysed significant organizational turnaround, helping them recover from the brink of bankruptcy to become profitable entities through strategic leadership (Robbins & Coulter, 2007). These transformations underscore the notion that leadership can significantly influence organizational culture, operational efficiency and employee engagement, leading to improved overall performance (Weihrich et al., 2008).

Furthermore, the significance of leadership extends beyond organizations and has societal effects as well. Nations that experience effective leadership often find themselves growing in various aspects, including economic stability, social cohesion and global standing. As evidence, the United States, Britain, France and India have demonstrated how leadership can have positive impact on a nation in gaining prominence and stability, and have achieved important success on the international stage thanks to the effective leadership of key figures throughout their histories (Robbins & Coulter, 2007; Weihrich et al., 2008). Under this lens, leaders are not merely information aggregators, but critical change agents who may drive resource mobilization, stakeholder alignment and collective action towards shared goals.

As we have already seen, scholars define leadership as the process of influencing groups to achieve specific objectives. This process involves recognizing both the individual and collective needs of team members, fostering a sense of belonging and creating a shared vision that aligns with organizational goals (Cole, 2006). Leadership effectiveness is often measured by its outcomes, such as employee satisfaction, productivity and organizational commitment. Therefore, it is clear that leadership is not solely about holding positional power but involves a deeper connection with people, building trust and nurturing relationships that promote cooperation and commitment (Robbins & Coulter, 2007; Weihrich et al., 2008).

1.2. Empathy definition, concepts, components, measurement and importance.

As I previously mentioned, empathy is gaining recognition as an essential element in effective leadership, particularly in roles that require managing different teams or engaging with clients and stakeholders.

1.2.1. Empathy definition, concepts, history and research.

Empathy is broadly defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person (Cherry, 2024). This complex construct encompasses both cognitive and emotional dimensions (Thompson, et al., 2022):

- Cognitive empathy involves understanding other people's perspectives or mental states. It is the ability to intellectually recognize what someone else is thinking or feeling (Davis, 1983).
- Emotional empathy involves sharing and responding to the emotional experiences of others. It is about feeling what another person feels and responding with appropriate emotions (Hoffman, 2000; Perry, 2023).

Goleman defined empathy as a fundamental component of emotional intelligence. He described empathy as "*the ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people*" and emphasized its vital role in constructing and managing proper relationship (Goleman, 1995).

The concept of empathy has evolved significantly over time, shaped by contributions from various fields, including psychology, philosophy and neuroscience.

The roots of empathy can be traced back to philosophical discussions in the 18th and 19th centuries. The German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder and later Robert Vischer, introduced the term "Einfühlung," which translates to "feeling into". This concept was initially used in aesthetics to describe the projection of one's feelings onto art and nature (Stueber, 2006).

In the early 20th century, empathy gained importance in psychology. Sigmund Freud and his contemporaries explored empathy in the therapeutic context, considering it essential for understanding patients' emotions (Freud, 1921). However, it was Carl Rogers, a pioneer of humanistic psychology, who profoundly influenced the understanding of empathy. Rogers

emphasized empathy as crucial for effective therapeutic relationships, defining it as the ability "to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy" (Rogers, 1957).

Empathy's conceptualization continued to evolve with the work of social and developmental psychologists. Martin Hoffman, for instance, contributed significantly to understanding empathy's developmental aspects. He proposed that empathy develops through a series of stages from infancy to adulthood, highlighting its role in moral development and prosocial behaviour (Hoffman, 2000).

More recently, Simon Baron-Cohen's research on empathy and its neurological underpinnings has provided insights into how empathy varies among individuals. His studies on conditions, such autism, have helped clarify the biological and cognitive mechanisms underlying empathetic abilities. Baron-Cohen's research has explored the brain mechanisms involved in empathy, identifying specific neural circuits that contribute to our ability to empathize. Key areas of the brain implicated in empathy include the medial prefrontal cortex, the anterior cingulate cortex and the inferior frontal gyrus. These areas are linked to aspects of social cognition including perspective taking, emotion recognition and empathic responding (Baron-Cohen, 2011). Baron-Cohen and his associates have used functional MRI (fMRI) to record the activation of these brain regions while people perform tasks that require empathy. It provides a biological foundation for viewing empathy as an interaction between cognitive and affective processes, mediated by particular brain structures (Decety & Jackson, 2004). His research also looks at genetics and hormones that affect empathy. He has studied how differences in genes that code for the hormone's oxytocin and vasopressin (which are involved in social bonding and behaviour) can influence certain empathetic abilities. Some individuals have genetic variants of the oxytocin receptor gene (OXTR) that may predispose them to be higher or lower in empathy (Rodrigues et al., 2009). Baron-Cohen has also studied how exposure to higher amounts of testosterone before birth can affect the extent to which someone may demonstrate empathy. Baron-Cohen has proposed that higher levels of testosterone in the womb results in lower levels of empathy in adulthood, thus providing one account by which males, on average, score lower on empathy scales than females (Baron-Cohen, 2011). The research, sensed the link between biology and empathy, with both genetics and hormones playing role both positively and negatively. Baron-Cohen's findings are helpful in understanding empathy and the reasons why it is such a varied phenomenon between individuals. His work also highlights the interplay between biology and cognition, as many scientists have done, and provides an alternative model

for understanding the continuity of empathy and why some humans are more empathic than others. In addition, the genetic and hormonal origins of empathy can help to interdisciplinary efforts to develop efficient empathic skills training programs for individuals with social skills deficits caused by genetic determinants or early childhood experiences (Baron-Cohen, 2011).

Empathy is increasingly viewed as a complex interaction between neural processes. Neuroscientists have identified brain regions, such as the anterior insula and anterior cingulate cortex, to be integral to empathetic responses involved in both experiencing and observing the pain of others (Singer et al., 2004; Keysers & Gazzola, 2009). This suggests that empathy is not just something we acquire as a skill as we develop; it is a biological phenomenon, important to our relationships as human beings.

Despite its many benefits, empathy faces challenges in modern society, especially given the fast pace of digital communication and social media. Researchers such as Sherry Turkle have argued that increased reliance on digital communication can sometimes reduce opportunities for genuine empathetic engagement, as face-to-face interactions are essential for fully understanding others' emotions (Turkle, 2015). In addition, high levels of stress, competition, and time pressure can also make it challenging for individuals to practice empathy in daily interactions, leading to what some psychologists call "*empathy fatigue*", "*the cost of caring*", which arises when the exposure to others' suffering adversities reduces one's emotional well-being (Figley, 2002). This fatigue can manifest as emotional numbness, decreased job satisfaction and a sense of detachment from others. As a result, individuals experiencing empathy fatigue may struggle to maintain the same level of empathy they once offered, impacting their ability to connect and engage with others effectively. (Figley, 2002).

1.2.2. Empathy importance.

Empathy is widely recognized as a key element in social connection and prosocial behaviour; it is essential for communication, relationship-building and conflict resolution. Why? Empathy denotes our ability as human beings to be able to connect with others by understanding and responding sensitively to others' emotions and perspectives, enhancing social cohesion and cooperation in both personal and professional contexts (Decety & Jackson, 2004). The relevance of empathy is especially highlighted in altruistic behaviours in which empathic concern and compassion influence people to help others in distress (Batson, 1991). Furthermore, empathy

is important in the aspect of moral reasoning and decision-making: people need to reflect on the consequences of their actions towards others (Eisenberg et al., 2002). For example, in healthcare, empathy improves patient satisfaction, treatment compliance and clinical outcomes through a better understanding of patient experiences and trust building (Halpern, 2003). Neurologically, it has been observed that even the smallest signs of empathy generate activity in the anterior insula and anterior cingulate cortex, regions of the brain that also process signal social pain and that likely underlie personal distress (Singer et al., 2004). This suggests that empathy is as deep rooted in social functioning for humans. Further, empathy can reduce stress, aggression and prejudice through thinking of others and sense of emotion, important in bridging the social divides (Batson et al., 1997; Decety & Cowell, 2014).

1.2.3. Empathy components.

Empathy is often considered a complex, multi-dimensional concept incorporating cognitive, emotional and action-orientation components (Neuman et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023). All these elements impact how a person reacts to others feelings and perspectives. The components have been approached separately by researchers to explain the different complexities of empathy and to understand the mechanisms behind the process of empathizing.

Cognitive empathy concerns identifying and understanding the feelings and viewpoints of another person on a purely intellectual level rather than on an emotional one; it usually refers to Theory of Mind (ToM), the ability to infer others' thoughts, beliefs, intentions (Premack & Woodruff, 1978; Stueber, 2006). This component of empathy reflects perspective-taking, or the ability to understand how a particular person feels or views the world (Davis, 1983). Simon Baron-Cohen explains cognitive empathy as a form of "*mind reading*", understanding what others are thinking, predicting and anticipating others' responses (Stueber 2006; Baron-Cohen, 2011). This element is also necessary in any profession or situation that needs an ability to be objective about the emotional states of others, even at the risk of emotional involvement on the part of the leader.

Emotional empathy, sometimes called affective empathy, is the capacity to actually feel the emotions that another person is experiencing. It is often characterized by mirroring others' emotional states and sharing in their emotional experiences (Batson, 2009). This shared emotional resonance is linked to the activation of mirror neurons in the brain, which fire both

when we perform an action and when we observe someone else performing the same action (Decety & Jackson, 2004). Baron-Cohen further explains that emotional empathy is what allows individuals to "*feel with*" others, which can lead to genuine emotional connection and sympathy (Baron-Cohen, 2011).

Compassionate empathy, also called empathic concern, is the affective or emotional, part of empathy that reflects the extent to which a person is motivated to reduce someone else's pain. This is a sense of empathy larger than emotion; it is a willingness to act because of a sense of responsibility or moral obligation. The prosocial-related aspect of this empathy has been extensively studied by Daniel Batson (2011). Compassionate empathy is a key motivator for actions like giving comfort or assisting others, particularly when people are suffering.

Although less commonly discussed, somatic empathy involves a physical response to another person's emotional state. Some researchers, such as Rizzolatti et al. (2001), suggest that this component includes involuntary physical reactions, such as flinching when witnessing someone else experience pain. While this aspect is closely related to affective empathy, it highlights the automatic, physiological reactions that people sometimes experience when observing others' emotions, which can contribute to an overall empathetic response.

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), developed by Mark H. Davis between 1980 and 1983, is one of the most widely used tools to measure empathy and provides a multidimensional model that combines both cognitive and affective components. The IRI includes four subscales, each measuring a distinct aspect of empathy: perspective taking, empathic concern, personal distress, and fantasy. These components reflect different dimensions of empathy, addressing both cognitive and affective elements (Davis, 1980).

According to the framework of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), empathy is not a unitary experience but rather a set of separate, differentiable abilities that people use to connect with others in various contexts and situations (Davis, 1994). Cognitive perspective-taking coupled with emotional responsiveness provides the nuances that characterize flexible social situations.

Research has highlighted distinct brain regions associated with empathy, particularly distinguishing between cognitive and affective components. For instance, cognitive empathy is associated with activity in the medial prefrontal cortex, which is involved in perspective-taking and Theory of Mind (ToM). In contrast, affective empathy is linked to the anterior insula and the

anterior cingulate cortex, areas related to emotional processing and the ability to experience other's feelings (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2009).

1.2.4. Empathy measurement.

The measurement of empathy has evolved significantly, with a considerable number of tools having been developed to capture its various dimensions. These measurements often separate cognitive and affective empathy, illustrating empathy's multifaceted nature as both a cognitive and emotional experience. Specific instruments and scales widely used in empathy research are notable for their emphasis and focus on different components of empathy.

As mentioned earlier in this research, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) is one of the most widely used tools for measuring empathy. Developed by psychologist Mark H. Davis in the earlier 1980s, the IRI is unique in its multidimensional approach, capturing empathy as a combination of cognitive and affective components rather than a single construct. This model recognizes that empathy involves both understanding others' perspectives (cognitive empathy) and experiencing emotional responses to others' feelings (affective empathy) (Davis, 1980). Each of these aspects is assessed through four distinct subscales, which allow researchers to examine different facets of empathy in both research and clinical settings:

- Perspective taking - this subscale assesses the cognitive side of empathy, specifically the tendency to adopt others' viewpoints and understand their thoughts and feelings. Often associated with cognitive empathy, perspective taking aligns closely with the Theory of Mind concepts, which suggest that the ability to take another's perspective is essential for understanding social situations, others' thoughts, feelings and motivations (Premack & Woodruff, 1978; Davis, 1983). Research highlights that individuals with higher scores in perspective-taking are more adept at negotiating social interactions, as they can predict how others might respond in various scenarios (Davis, 1994; Batson et al., 1997).
- Fantasy - this dimension is indicative of the respondent's ability to creatively imagine themselves in non-reality-based situations, like those of novels, movies or plays. Although this might not be especially applicable to real life empathy, it measures how likely someone will think of themselves in a fictional situation and possibly carries over

to real life and the closed loop of empathy as well. This aspect emphasizes an imaginative version of which someone experiences empathy with characters from narratives (Davis, 1980; Stueber, 2006). Fantasy scores might also reflect the extent to which someone can become emotionally immersed in a story. While empathy does not require the special trait Davis (1983) refers to, the trait may facilitate the development of empathic skills in practice by letting people practice imagining what others' emotional experiences are like in special circumstances (Stueber, 2006).

- Empathic concern - it evaluates the affective response to others' emotions, specifically feelings of compassion and sympathy toward others in distress. This aligns closely with affective empathy and relates to the emotional connection one feels toward others in difficult situations. High empathic concern scores have been linked to prosocial behaviour, as individuals are more likely to respond altruistically (Batson, 1991; Eisenberg et al., 2002). This aspect is linked to emotional responsiveness and the desire to alleviate another person's suffering.

- Personal distress - this subscale measures one's own discomfort and anxiety in response to others' suffering. This component is somewhat distinct, as it can represent a self-oriented aspect of empathy: Davis (1983) explains that personal distress reflects a reactive response rather than an outward focus on the other's needs, which can sometimes lead to avoidance rather than helping behaviour (Davis, 1983). High scores on this scale suggest that individuals may find it difficult to regulate their emotions when confronted with others' distress, which can sometimes impede prosocial responses if the distress becomes overwhelming (Davis, 1983; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Furthermore, high scores in personal distress are often associated with negative emotions and can be linked to "*empathy fatigue*" in caregiving professions, where excessive empathic distress can lead to burnout (Figley, 2002).

The IRI has been validated across various populations, showing strong psychometric properties (Davis, 1994). Each subscale provides distinct but complementary insights, making it effective in understanding individual differences in empathy and its impact in interpersonal relationships. For instance, studies using the IRI have shown that individuals with higher scores in perspective-taking and empathic-concern are more likely to engage in helping behaviours, while higher personal distress scores are often linked with social withdrawal in stressful situations (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987).

The IRI has long been one of the fundaments of empathy research; however, it has several critiques. Some scholars suggest that self-report measures may not always correctly reflect empathy levels as responses given may be affected by social desirability bias (Batson, 1991). In addition, particularly recent studies demonstrate crossing of IRI subscales that limit clarity of the results and indicate necessity of second measures of empathy, complementary to IRI (Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2009).

The Empathy Quotient (EQ) is a self-report measure developed by Simon Baron-Cohen and his colleagues to evaluate empathy as a single multidimensional construct. Originally designed to identify differences in empathy levels among individuals with autism spectrum conditions, the EQ has since been applied more broadly to understand empathy as a trait across various populations (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). This tool provides insights into both cognitive and affective empathy dimensions, as well as into social sensitivity and empathic responses to others.

The EQ was designed as a simple questionnaire, containing 60 items (40 empathy-related items and 20 filler items), to assess an individual's empathy quotient by evaluating their understanding and response to others' emotions. The EQ is scored based on how often participants agree or disagree with statements that reflect empathic tendencies in various situations (Lawrence et al., 2004). Its purpose is to provide a reliable measure of empathy that reflects its complexity while remaining easy to administer in both clinical and research contexts.

The EQ does not explicitly separate empathy into cognitive and affective components, as in other tools like the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), but many of its items capture elements of both. Items assess a person's:

- Cognitive empathy - this aspect involves recognizing and interpreting another person's emotions or mental state, similar to the concept of Theory of Mind. For instance, questions evaluate a person’s ability to interpret subtle social cues or understand when someone feels uncomfortable (Baron-Cohen et al., 2004).
- Affective empathy - some EQ items capture an individual's affective responses, such as emotional resonance with others’ experiences. For instance, items that gauge the degree of emotional concern or sensitivity to others’ distress are thought to reflect the affective side of empathy (Allison et al., 2011).

- Social skills and sensitivity - EQ items also assess broader social awareness, such as the ease of engaging in social interactions or detecting others' nonverbal signals. This element reflects how empathy contributes to social cohesion and interpersonal relationships, especially in nuanced social contexts (Baron-Cohen et al., 2015).

The EQ is self-reported; individuals answer on a four-point scale with higher scores showing a greater propensity to empathise. As reflected in empathic processing as assessed by the EQ, research suggests that individuals on the spectrum have lower EQ (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). It has therefore been suggested that a cut-off score of 30 out of 80 is used for detecting individuals with likely empathic deficits, particularly in the context of clinical evaluations for autism or other disorders characterized by social difficulties.

Since its development, the EQ has been widely used to assess empathy across diverse groups, including gender-based empathy differences and empathy in people with psychiatric and neurological conditions. Studies consistently show that women score higher on the EQ than men, supporting the theory that females may generally have greater empathic sensitivity, though this remains a debated finding in the field (Lawrence et al., 2004).

The EQ has shown good psychometric properties such as internal consistency and test-retest reliability. Alternatively, some researchers criticized that EQ does not differentiate between cognitive and affective empathy clearly, which makes EQ less distinctly isolate these components compared to tools like the IRI (Griffin et al., 2018).

However, some researchers argue that the EQ's reliance on self-report can lead to biases, as respondents may answer based on how they wish to be perceived rather than on their true empathy levels. Additionally, some studies suggest that the EQ's focus on trait empathy may not capture situational or context-dependent variations in empathic response (Derntl et al., 2010).

The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) is a self-report measure designed to assess empathy in a straightforward and reliable way. Developed by Spreng, McKinnon, Mar and Levine in 2009, the TEQ focuses primarily on the affective component of empathy, such as emotional resonance and the automatic emotional response one feels in reaction to others' emotional states (Spreng et al., 2009). Unlike multidimensional tools like the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), the TEQ is structured as a single-factor model aiming to streamline empathy assessment by concentrating on the emotional experiences tied to empathic responses.

The TEQ includes 16 items that measure typical empathic reactions to a variety of situations. Participants rate statements, such as "I often get caught up in other people's feelings", on a Likert scale, assessing how frequently they experience these responses. This design is intended to minimize social desirability bias and to ensure clarity in distinguishing emotional empathy from other related constructs, such as sympathy or cognitive empathy (Spreng et al., 2009).

An important reason behind the TEQ´s development was to create a brief, less difficult tool across all settings of implementation, including clinical practice and research, where time and response burden are important considerations. The TEQ has demonstrated adequate internal consistency and construct validity such as the ability to correlate with existing measures of the same construct as the Empathy Quotient, while still predicting theoretically relevant behaviours of emotional empathy (Davis & Franzoi, 1991; Spreng et al., 2009). Additionally, evidence exists of the TEQ's cross-cultural robustness, demonstrating that it works similarly in different cultural environments (Melchers et al., 2015), leading TEQ to be recognised as a global instrument for the assessment of empathy.

Overall, the TEQ's emphasis on affective responses makes it particularly valuable for exploring empathy's role in social bonding and emotional connection, providing researchers with insights into empathy's emotional dimension in both typical and clinical populations (Spreng et al., 2009).

The BES, will be used to assess empathy in adolescents and adults and was developed by Jolliffe and Farrington (2006), as a self-report questionnaire. The scale has evolved to provide a more specific instrument able to differentiate cognitive empathy from affective empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006).

The BES consists of 20 items divided into two primary subscales:

- Cognitive empathy - this subscale assesses an individual's ability to understand and interpret the emotions and perspectives of others. Sample items include statements like "I can understand my friend's happiness when she/he does well at something." (Baldner & McGingley, 2014).
- Affective empathy - this subscale captures the capacity to emotionally resonate with others, involving feelings of sympathy or emotional sharing. An example item for this

subscale is "After being with a friend who is sad about something, I usually feel sad." (Baldner & McGingley, 2014).

These items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) and provide a quantitative measure of empathy levels in both dimensions. The BES has shown strong internal consistency, with reliability for each subscale, making it a reliable tool across different age groups (Besecker & Armstrong, 2002).

The BES has been applied in various fields, particularly in research involving adolescent populations, as empathy development is crucial during this stage for social and emotional maturation (Carlo et al., 2010). Furthermore, it has been used to explore empathy deficits in clinical populations, including individuals with antisocial behaviour, psychopathy and autism spectrum disorders (ASD), helping researchers understand how cognitive and affective empathy may vary in these groups (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Dadds et al., 2008). This application aligns with findings that individuals with certain behavioural disorders may show intact cognitive empathy but reduced affective empathy, providing insights into specific social difficulties in these groups.

The BES has been culturally adapted and validated in several contexts, and it has proven to be a versatile tool for empathy research in different cultures across the globe. For example, adaptations of the BES have been successfully tested in diverse samples across Western and non-Western cultures, including studies with Turkish and Chinese adolescents, and have confirmed cross-cultural reliability and consistency in measuring empathy constructs (Topcu & Erdur-Baker, 2012; Liu et al., 2021).

Despite its widespread use, some researchers have noted limitations. Critics argue that the BES, like many self-report measures, may be susceptible to social desirability bias, where respondents might answer in a way they perceive as socially acceptable rather than honest (Vachon & Lynam, 2016).

Basic emotion-specific empathy measures are instruments used to measure empathy with specific fundamental emotions, such as sadness, anger, fear and happiness. Differing from general empathy scales, these measures assess how individuals are able to identify, resonate and respond with specific emotion conveyed by others. In addition to the specificity in empathy deficits or strengths, which could be studied in relation to each specific emotion, these tools are advantageous in both psychological research and clinical sciences (Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2009).

The purpose of emotion-specific empathy measures is to capture empathy for distinct emotions, acknowledging that empathy might manifest differently depending on the type of emotion involved. For example, some individuals might find it easier to empathize with happiness than with anger, or vice versa, depending on personality traits or psychological conditions (Pond et al., 2012). By breaking down empathy into emotion-specific categories, researchers can better understand individual empathy profiles and their impact on social interactions.

Some commonly used measures and methodologies to capture emotion-specific empathy include the Multifaceted Empathy Test (MET) and specific subscales within broader empathy assessments. The MET was developed by Dziobek et al. (2008); it is a photo-based test in which participants view images depicting individuals in various emotional states and then assess both their emotional resonance and understanding of the specific emotion. The MET includes cognitive and affective components for each emotion and has been particularly useful in studies of clinical populations, such as people with autism spectrum disorders and psychopathy, who might show specific deficits in understanding or sharing certain emotions (Dziobek et al., 2008).

The application of emotion-specific empathy measures has been reported in some studies. Therefore, research has found that individuals with high levels of trait anger may show high empathy for anger but low empathy for sadness or fear, potentially impacting conflict resolution and interpersonal dynamics (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). Likewise, it has been suggested that empathy for happiness is linked to prosocial behaviour and good interpersonal relations, demonstrating that empathy can help create social bonds and community (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987).

These tools are also valuable in understanding empathy deficits. In clinical populations, individuals with antisocial personality disorder may have specific empathy deficits for sadness, which could contribute to difficulties in feeling compassion or guilt (Blair, 2005). Conversely, people with social anxiety may struggle with empathy for fear or anger, given their own heightened sensitivity to negative emotions (Pond et al., 2012).

While providing important information, various empathy measures that are emotion-specific also have limitations. One key challenge is the subjective interpretation of emotions, as different cultural or individual factors can affect how emotions are expressed or perceived (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). Moreover, most of these measures are based on self-reports or photographs

which may not adequately reflect empathic responding in real-life social interactions (Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2009).

Basic behavioural and physiological measures of empathy are techniques that evaluate empathy by observing physical responses, physiological changes and behaviour, rather than relying solely on self-reports. These methods are particularly valuable for studying empathy in real-time and in contexts where self-reported empathy might not fully capture genuine empathic responses. They help provide a more objective measurement by analysing participants' reactions to others' emotions and experiences.

Behavioural measures of empathy can be divided into:

- Facial expression analysis - this method involves observing and coding facial expressions in response to others' emotional states. Researchers analyse facial reactions for signs of mimicry, such as smiling when someone is happy or frowning when someone is sad, as mimicry is often associated with affective empathy (Dimberg & Thunberg, 1998). Facial expression coding has been used in empathy studies to observe whether individuals unconsciously reflect the emotions they witness, indicating an automatic empathic response (Sonnby-Borgström, 2002).
- Body language and posture matching - researchers also assess empathy by observing whether individuals unconsciously mirror others' body language or postures, an effect known as “postural mirroring”. Studies show that when people are more empathically engaged, they tend to subtly imitate the body language of the person with whom they are interacting, suggesting a nonverbal form of social bonding and empathy (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999).
- Helping and prosocial behaviour - another behavioural measure involves observing whether a person engages in prosocial actions, such as offering assistance, in response to another’s distress. For instance, Batson's (1991) empathy-altruism hypothesis suggests that genuine empathy motivates prosocial behaviours toward those in need, often used as an indirect measure of empathic concern (Batson, 1991).

Physiological measures of empathy can be categorized as follows:

- Heart rate and skin conductance - empathy research frequently uses heart rate and skin conductance to measure emotional arousal in response to others’ emotions. Increased

heart rate or skin conductance levels may indicate an empathic reaction to witnessing someone in distress, as these physiological changes are linked with heightened emotional engagement. Eisenberg et al. (1989) found that individuals with high empathy often show increased heart rate deceleration, which indicates focused attention on others' distress (Eisenberg et al., 1989).

- Pupil dilation - the widening of the pupils is another physiological response that can indicate empathy. Studies have found that individuals often experience pupil dilation when witnessing others' emotional expressions, particularly those showing distress or pain. This response is thought to represent empathy because it reflects heightened emotional arousal and cognitive processing of the observed emotional state (Harrison et al., 2007).

- Electroencephalography (EEG) and brain imaging - EEG and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) are used to measure neural responses to empathy. Researchers examine the activation of specific brain areas, such as the anterior insula and anterior cingulate cortex, which are associated with emotional empathy and pain perception. Studies have shown that seeing others in pain activates similar neural circuits as experiencing pain oneself, suggesting a neural basis for affective empathy (Singer et al., 2004). Additionally, EEG has been used to observe mirror neuron activity, which is thought to play a role in empathic responses by activating similar neural patterns when observing others' actions or emotional expressions (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004).

- Hormonal responses - oxytocin, often referred to as the "bonding hormone", has also been studied in relation to empathy. Higher levels of oxytocin are linked to increased empathy, especially in the context of emotional bonding and caregiving. Studies suggest that administering oxytocin can enhance empathetic behaviours and increase emotional recognition, highlighting its potential role in empathy and social bonding (Zak, 2008; Bartz et al., 2011).

There are particular insights into empathy that may not be evident through self-report scales, and instead by associated behaviour or physiological measures. For example, studies using these methodologies have found that individuals with high levels of psychopathy demonstrate decreased physiological responses, such as low skin conductance, when exposed to others'

distress, which is consistent with the empathy deficits frequently associated with psychopathy (Blair, 2005). In contrast, individuals with autism spectrum disorders may display empathy through physiological responses even if they have difficulties to express empathy (Decety & Meyer, 2008).

While these measures provide objective insights, they also have limitations. Physiological responses can sometimes indicate general arousal rather than empathy specifically, meaning these reactions are not always a direct indication of empathic concern (Cacioppo et al., 2007). Moreover, cultural and contextual factors can influence behaviour and physiology, and researchers must account for these variables when interpreting results.

1.3. Relation between empathy and leadership and case studies' analysis.

1.3.1. The relation between empathy and leadership.

In contemporary leadership, empathy is increasingly viewed as essential for managing diverse teams and interacting with clients and stakeholders (in jointhecollective.com, 2023). A study conducted by Daniel Goleman found that leaders who exhibit high levels of empathy tend to perform better in key areas such as team collaboration, conflict resolution and overall organizational performance (Goleman, 1998). Goleman's work highlights that empathy is not just a "soft skill" but a critical competency that can drive business results. Empathy allows leaders to understand and share the feelings of others. This ability to connect on an emotional level helps leaders build trust and loyalty, which are foundational for effective leadership (Goleman, 2015).

In leadership, in fact, empathy refers to a leader's capacity to understand and relate to their team members' feelings, perspectives and experiences. Research has shown that when leaders are empathetic, they can create stronger connections with their employees, which positively affects organizational commitment, job satisfaction and employee retention (Kock et al., 2019; Gentry et al., 2007). Studies have shown that empathy contributes to both relational and performance-oriented leadership, creating environments where employees feel valued and motivated (Humphrey, 2002). When leaders genuinely care about their employees' well-being and show that they understand their challenges, it creates a sense of psychological safety. Employees feel valued and respected, which enhances their loyalty and commitment to the

organization (Boyatzis et al., 2013). This is particularly important in today's diverse and dynamic work environments, where employees come from various backgrounds and bring different perspectives. Leaders who demonstrate empathy are better equipped to navigate cultural differences, manage conflicts and create an inclusive workplace where everyone feels heard and appreciated.

In leadership, the two forms of empathy, cognitive and emotional, work in tandem to create a more compassionate and responsive approach to managing people and situations. By understanding the thoughts and feelings of team members, leaders can better anticipate their needs, address their concerns and foster a supportive work environment. This, in turn, leads to higher levels of employee engagement, satisfaction and productivity and also drives innovation and creativity by leveraging different viewpoints (Kock et al., 2019)

Moreover, empathy plays a crucial role not only within internal team dynamics but also in external relationships with clients and stakeholders. Leaders that understand what their clients are going through can build better, deeper relationships. An empathetic approach will enable the leaders to anticipate client expectations, ensure customised service and tackle any problems promptly and efficiently. In a competitive marketplace, this empathetic interaction can make an organization stand out and allow it to gain success.

Empathy also engages with other essential leadership qualities such as emotional intelligence, active listening and effective communication. Leaders who are emotionally intelligent can manage their own emotions and understand the emotional states of others, which is fundamental for empathetic interactions. Active listening allows leaders to fully engage with their team members, ensuring that they feel heard and understood. Effective communication ensures that empathetic insights are conveyed clearly and constructively, fostering open and honest dialogue. As the workplace continues to evolve, the value of empathetic leadership becomes increasingly evident, making it an indispensable trait for leaders aiming to inspire, motivate and drive success in their organizations.

Transformational leadership, a style characterized by inspiring and motivating followers toward growth and innovation, often incorporates empathy as a core element. Leaders who are able to “emotionally connect” with their teams demonstrate higher levels of trust and cooperation, which are critical to achieving organizational change (Bass & Riggio, 2006). For instance, Kellett, Humphrey, and Sleeth (2006) argue that leaders with higher emotional

empathy are more effective at transformational leadership because they can inspire loyalty and encourage followers to invest in the organization's vision. Similarly, George (2000) found that empathetic leaders are better equipped to handle the emotional dynamics of change management, as they can both recognize and address employees' emotional responses to new initiatives.

Servant leadership is a concept that has captured the spotlight in recent years as a positive force of change in team morale and engagement, as it advocates for leading with the focus on the needs of other and lead by example via ethical, empathetic leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Liden et al., 2008). Empathy is particularly relevant to servant leadership as it enables leaders to understand and connect with the perspectives of their followers, fostering a culture of support and collaboration. Studies by Liden et al. (2014) found out that this empathy in servant leaders brings to greater team empowerment and organizational citizenship behaviours since the employees feel that their personal needs and the well-being is recognised and valued by the leader.

Emotional intelligence (EI), which encompasses the ability to understand and manage emotions, has been closely linked with empathetic leadership. Research by Goleman (1998) posits that empathy is one of the five critical components of EI and is fundamental for effective leadership. According to Goleman, empathy allows leaders to recognize and interpret employees' non-verbal cues, facilitating better responses to workplace challenges. In a similar vein, Côté and Miners (2006) found that leaders with high EI, including empathy, tend to perform better in complex environments requiring nuanced interpersonal interactions. Furthermore, a meta-analysis by Joseph and Newman (2010) revealed a strong correlation between EI and leadership effectiveness, indicating that empathy significantly contributes to leaders' ability to influence and motivate others.

Some studies have also explored the role of empathy in leadership considering gender differences. Research has found that female leaders often show higher levels of empathy and that this trait is positively perceived in their leadership style (Eagly & Carli, 2003). A study by Eagly and Johnson (1990) observed that women are more likely to adopt democratic and participative leadership styles, which are associated with empathetic traits, compared to men, who may tend toward a more autocratic style. This empathy-driven approach may contribute to more inclusive and collaborative team environments. However, it's important to note that

empathy is beneficial for leaders of any gender, as it improves overall team dynamics and fosters open communication.

While empathy seems to have numerous advantages in leadership, some scholars highlight potential disadvantages. For instance, Grant and Sandberg (2018) argue that excessive empathy might lead to emotional exhaustion, particularly in high-stress environments. This "empathy fatigue" can impair a leader's decision-making ability, especially if leaders find themselves overly involved in their employees' emotions. Similarly, Bloom (2017) contends that empathy, when applied without clear boundaries, can sometimes cloud objectivity, suggesting that leaders should balance empathy with rational detachment to ensure effective decision-making.

A multitude of case studies by exemplary companies show how the right empathy in leadership conducts to great organization results including better employee well-being and greater engagement, customer relationships and boost in corporate social responsibility. These instances demonstrate that empathy in leadership is more than a moral and ethical value, it is also a strategic advantage that can help organizations achieve lasting success in the long period.

1.3.2. Analysis of previous case studies about the integration of empathy on leadership.

Empathy, as a central leadership trait, has led to significant cultural shifts and improved performance across various industries. The case of Microsoft under Satya Nadella is a compelling example of how empathy in leadership can transform both organizational culture and business outcomes. When Satya Nadella became CEO of Microsoft in 2014, he brought a new approach to leadership that emphasized empathy as a core value. This shift was especially notable since Microsoft had historically been known for its competitive, performance-driven culture, which sometimes created friction between employees and stifled innovation. Nadella's leadership focused on fostering collaboration and innovation by promoting a culture of empathy within the company.

Nadella's focus on empathy was evident in different ways. Firstly, he emphasized the importance of "listening to others" and understanding the perspectives of both employees and customers. He wanted employees to be more engaged with each other's experiences, fostering better communication and collaboration across teams. As he explained in interviews, empathy was a driving force behind his leadership style because it allowed him to connect with the

people around him, build trust and inspire them to work towards shared goals (Shumsky & Tilley, 2018).

One notable manifestation of this was Nadella's push for a customer-centric mindset within Microsoft. He encouraged employees to focus on creating products and services that were not just technologically advanced, but also accessible and inclusive. For example, Nadella's leadership guided the development of products like the Xbox Adaptive Controller, which was designed to make gaming more accessible for people with disabilities. This is a prime example of how empathy for a specific customer need led to innovative product development (Shumsky & Tilley, 2018).

Moreover, Nadella's emphasis on empathy helped to reshape Microsoft's internal culture. He focused on creating a more inclusive environment where employees felt valued and heard and encouraged a "growth mindset" where failure was viewed as an opportunity for learning. This cultural shift has been credited with helping to improve employee morale, reduce turnover and boost collaboration across departments. The results of this transformation were clear: Microsoft experienced a significant financial and reputational turnaround under Nadella's leadership, with improved employee engagement, higher productivity and a much more positive work environment (Shumsky & Tilley, 2018).

Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Airbnb's CEO Brian Chesky demonstrated empathetic leadership by prioritizing the well-being of both employees and customer in crisis management. When the pandemic struck in early 2020, Airbnb, like many other companies, faced significant challenges, such as widespread travel cancellations and a violent decline in bookings. In the face of this uncertainty, Chesky's response was characterized by a strong sense of empathy for both his employees and customers, demonstrating the importance of emotional intelligence, care and compassion in leadership during times of crisis.

Transparency was the first step Chesky took in his approach. He freely admitted the seriousness of the situation to employees and the community at large, while providing consistent updates on the company's status and its response. Taking their point of view, Chesky recognized the crisis's emotional impact on employees, hosts and customers and emphasised that everyone was being looked after by the company during these challenging times (Iyer, 2020).

One of the most notable aspects of Chesky's empathetic leadership was how he managed the layoffs that the company had to make due to the significant loss of revenue. In May 2020, Airbnb

laid off about 25% of its workforce, but Chesky's leadership during the process was marked by an unusually high level of care for the impacted employees. He provided affected employees with generous severance packages, continued health insurance and job placement support. Chesky also wrote a personal letter to each affected employee, where he showed how he appreciated their individual contributions to Airbnb; further, this highlighted his personal commitment to empathy and respect (Iyer, 2020). This approach helped maintain trust among the remaining employees, who saw their CEO as someone who deeply cared for the welfare of the workforce.

In addition to his focus on employees, Chesky also displayed empathy toward Airbnb's hosts, many of whom were significantly impacted by the travel restrictions and cancellations. The company offered financial support, including a $250 million relief fund for hosts who had to deal with cancellations due to COVID-19. Chesky's leadership made it clear that Airbnb would prioritize the needs of both hosts and guests during this challenging time, helping to maintain strong relationships with key stakeholders (Iyer, 2020).

Chesky's sensitive response saved Airbnb's brand image in a time of crisis. Airbnb was able to retain a loyal community of users and employees by prioritising the support of employees and hosts and being open and honest. Additionally, the empathy-driven leadership style neutralized the negatives of the pandemic and ultimately reinforced Airbnb's long-term belief in its core values of trust, community and belonging.

Salesforce's leader, Marc Benioff, has made empathy a central principle in his corporate strategy, particularly through his commitment to employee well-being and social responsibility. His leadership approach has not only improved employee satisfaction but has also strengthened Salesforce's overall reputation and performance in the competitive tech industry.

A key example of Salesforce's focus on employee well-being is the company's "Ohana" culture, which is inspired by the Hawaiian concept of family. Benioff adopted this model to foster a work environment where employees are seen as integral members of a supportive community. In the Ohana culture, employees are encouraged to collaborate, support one another and maintain a work-life balance, reflecting Benioff's belief that an empathetic approach to leadership can lead to higher engagement, retention, and overall satisfaction (Benioff & Langley, 2019).

Salesforce has also introduced a range of employee support initiatives, which demonstrate its commitment to empathetic leadership. One of the most significant of these initiatives was the

company's focus on mental health. Salesforce offered various resources to help employees manage stress and maintain their mental well-being. These resources include access to mental health services, mindfulness programs, and paid time off specifically dedicated to mental health (Benioff & Langley, 2019). By prioritizing mental health and wellness, Salesforce has created an environment where employees feel that their personal well-being is valued, which in turn helps improve overall productivity and engagement.

Another notable initiative is Salesforce's commitment to pay equality. Under Benioff's leadership, the company has undertaken regular audits to ensure that employees are paid equally for equal work, regardless of gender or race. This commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) is an essential aspect of empathetic leadership, as it helps to create a more inclusive and supportive work environment where all employees feel respected and valued (Benioff & Langley, 2019). This initiative not only promotes fairness but also aligns with the company's core values of respect and empathy, reinforcing the idea that leadership should be responsive to the diverse needs of employees.

Benioff has also advocated for corporate social responsibility as a key component of Salesforce's leadership strategy. His empathetic approach to leadership extends beyond the company's internal operations to the broader community. One example of this is Salesforce's ongoing commitment to philanthropy and community outreach. The company has pledged to donate a portion of its revenue to various charitable causes and encourages employees to engage in volunteer work by offering paid time off for volunteering (Benioff & Langley, 2019). This initiative reflects the company's commitment to making a positive impact on society, showing that empathetic leadership can extend beyond organizational boundaries and benefit the larger community.

Salesforce has made significant profits and happier employees by focusing on employee well-being, mental health, pay equality and social responsibility. Research has demonstrated that companies focusing on worker well-being experience greater employee engagement, reduced turnover and stronger overall performance. Research has shown that companies with strong cultures of empathy and employee support often report higher levels of customer satisfaction, as employees who feel valued and cared for show up more ready to provide their best work. For Salesforce, empathetic leadership and commitment to employee well-being have been the cornerstone of the company and its journey to be a leader in the cloud computing space.

Another example regards The Container Store, a leading specialty retailer in storage and organization solutions, which has earned a reputation for its strong employee-first philosophy under the leadership of co-founder and former CEO Kip Tindell. The company's commitment to putting employees at the centre of its operations has been key to its success and high levels of customer satisfaction. This employee-centric culture is another example of how empathetic leadership can directly contribute to both a positive work environment and business performance.

Tindell's approach to leadership is built on a set of principles based on Conscious Capitalism, an idea originally put forth by John Mackey and Raj Sisodia in their book *Conscious Capitalism: Liberating the Heroic Spirit of Business* (2013). This concept stresses that instead of solely focusing on maximizing profits for shareholders, businesses should also consider their impact on all stakeholders, including employees, customers and the communities they operate in. Tindell adopted this model ensuring a workplace where employees are respected, cared for and supported. This emphasis improves customer satisfaction and thereby, leads to long term business success.

The key to the Container Store's success is its focus on attracting, training and retaining the best talent. Tindell and his leadership team invest heavily in the recruitment process, offering competitive pay and benefits to employees, which is a significant step toward ensuring that staff feel valued. Employees at The Container Store earn salaries that are notably above the industry average for retail positions and the company also offers generous benefits, including health insurance, retirement plans and paid time off. This approach is a manifestation of empathy, as it recognizes and responds to the financial and personal needs of employees (Mackey & Sisodia, 2013).

In addition to offering competitive compensation, The Container Store places a strong emphasis on training and development. Its extensive and perpetual training programs provide excellent customer service. New hires receive 263 hours of training on average, which is well above the industry standard. This investment provides a greater sense of confidence and competence in their roles while also reinforcing a psychological sense of belonging in the organization. Focusing on developing their employees demonstrates that empathetic leadership can not only provide better business outcomes through human capital spend, but create greater job satisfaction, greater levels of engagement and greater overall performance (Tindell, 2014).

Furthermore, The Container Store's leadership recognizes the importance of work-life balance. To support this, the company offers flexible scheduling options, ensuring that employees have time to balance personal and professional commitments. This flexibility, alongside the focus on training, creates an environment where employees feel supported both personally and professionally, enhancing job satisfaction and loyalty. When employees are treated as the company's most valuable asset, they are more likely to be engaged, productive and loyal, which benefits the company in the long run (Mackey & Sisodia, 2013).

Perhaps the biggest result of The Container Store's employee-first way of thinking is their low turnover rate. The annual turnover in the company is especially impressive in an industry frequently associated with high levels of turnover. The success is due to the company investing heavily in its employees with good pay, training and benefits, resulting in the retention of top talent and a highly skilled workforce. Therefore, it gives company an advanced customer service because having more experienced and well-trained employees are likely to serve much better thus improving customer experience and increasing customer loyalty towards brand.

Moreover, the employee-first philosophy directly correlates with high levels of customer satisfaction. The Container Store's focus on building a highly skilled, loyal, and motivated team enables the company to deliver an exceptional customer experience, which, in turn, has contributed to its success. According to studies on retail and customer satisfaction, employees who are treated with respect and empathy tend to have more positive interactions with customers, leading to greater customer satisfaction and repeat business (Mackey & Sisodia, 2013). The company's commitment to both its employees and customers has created a positive feedback loop, where happy employees lead to happy customers, which supports continued business growth.

An employee-first mindset at the Container Store has proven that compassionate leadership will foster a high-performance culture and achieve sustainable business results. His empathy-laden leadership style is typical in his knowing of employee's needs, as every employee who feels supported and respected will be inclined to return such affection back to the organization in the form of business growth. As I already mentioned, this strategy has led to lower turnover and higher customer satisfaction, while also enabling The Container Store to stand out in a crowded retail space.

Patagonia is another example: it extended more than employee-centred empathetic leadership to include social responsibility and environmental activism. The founder, Yvon Chouinard, instilled a climate of compassion, sustainability, and corporate social responsibility within it, which makes Patagonia a business for which profit is not the primary concern but the last of the aims. Additionally, by adopting and implementing employee-centred policies and sustainable practices, Patagonia has cultivated a loyal customer base and a dedicated and engaged workforce.

Patagonia has had environmental responsibility as its key focus ever since its foundation. Patagonia donates 1% of its sales under its "1% for the Planet" program, an initiative Chouinard started in 2002. This commitment demonstrates that the company view protecting the environment is not just a corporate social responsibility, but a business objective. Patagonia's mission statement "We're in business to save our home planet" highlights the urgency for environmental conservation and shapes its business processes. The company often incorporates environmental messaging into its marketing, uses sustainable materials within its products, advocates for sustainable consumption and encourages its consumers to "buy less and buy better" (Chouinard & Stanley, 2016).

Patagonia's environmental advocacy goes beyond traditional corporate donations. For instance, the company promotes repair and reuse of products through its Worn Wear program, providing repairs on Patagonia items to extend their life and reduce waste. Patagonia has also taken political positions supporting environmental legislation, even suing the U.S. government over protected lands in 2017. This environmental stance is integrated into the company's business model, reflecting Chouinard's belief in corporate accountability and environmental activism as essential elements of a responsible company (Chouinard & Stanley, 2016).

Patagonia's empathy for its employees includes a range of policies to support work-life balance and personal well-being. One of the most famous examples is Patagonia's onsite childcare program: based at the company headquarters in Ventura, California, the facility gives parents the possibility to work close to their children, creating a more family-oriented workplace. This program reflects Patagonia's empathy for parents to balance work and parenting responsibilities. According to studies, access to on-site childcare has contributed to employee satisfaction and retention at Patagonia, as it alleviates the stress associated with childcare and supports parents in their professional and personal lives (Chouinard & Stanley, 2016).

Patagonia promotes a flexible work culture wherein employees feel appreciated and able to balance work and personal life. In fact, the company actually encourages employees to take time off to engage with environmental activism, enabling them to merge personal passion with their professional roles. In addition, employees can also participate in company-sponsored volunteer trips for environmental projects around the world. These initiatives not only support employee wellness but reinforce Patagonia's company culture, providing an atmosphere of community and a harmonized employee value system with the company value system.

Patagonia's empathy-driven leadership is also reflected in its approach to compensation and labour practices. The company, member of the Fair Labor Association (FLA), is transparent about its efforts to ensure fair wages and ethical labour practices throughout its supply chain. This transparency is part of Patagonia's broader commitment to social responsibility, which resonates with employees and customers alike.

Moreover, Patagonia offers competitive salaries and benefits to its employees, recognizing that fair compensation is integral to job satisfaction and loyalty. The company's commitment to fair pay and equitable working conditions illustrates how empathy-driven leadership can contribute to employee engagement, trust and organizational commitment. Research has shown that companies with fair labour practices and ethical supply chains often experience higher levels of employee satisfaction and customer loyalty, as they are seen as socially responsible and aligned with ethical values (Chouinard & Stanley, 2016).

Patagonia's empathetic approach to both environmental and employee advocacy has fostered a strong sense of community within the company, creating a loyal workforce and an engaged customer base. The company's commitment to social and environmental causes has helped it build a reputation as an ethical brand, attracting customers who share similar values. Patagonia's leadership illustrates how companies that prioritize empathy and values can achieve sustainable business success by fostering strong brand loyalty and long-term customer relationships.

1.4. Research gap

Looking at the approach of companies like Patagonia and Microsoft, it appears to me that fostering a strong values-driven culture not only enhances employee satisfaction but also drives

long-term organizational success. Similarly, considering companies such as Salesforce, I see a compelling link between empathetic practices and improved employee engagement, which ultimately translates into stronger customer relationships and sustained business growth. These examples highlight empathy's transformative potential in leadership, suggesting it is not merely a soft skill but a pivotal driver of organizational excellence.

However, despite these examples and even with the growing recognition of empathy as an important leadership quality, there remains a significant gap in the existing research when it comes to understanding of how empathy specifically impacts leadership effectiveness across varied organizational settings. Much of the current literature explores the theoretical value of empathy in leadership (Goleman, 1998; Kouzes & Posner, 2003) and discusses its general benefits, such as improved employee engagement and job satisfaction (Humphrey, 2002; Gentry et al., 2007). While valuable, these studies lack robust empirical evidence that examines empathy’s measurable influence on leadership practices within real-world organizational contexts. Without this empirical grounding, the actionable implications of empathy in leadership remain underexplored, limiting its practical application across industries and roles.

Furthermore, while case studies on specific companies, such as Microsoft under Satya Nadella (Shumsky & Tilley, 2018) and Salesforce under Marc Benioff (Benioff & Langley, 2019), provide valuable insights into the positive outcomes of empathetic leadership, I feel there is a lack of longitudinal research that systematically evaluates these effects across various industries and company sizes. Furthermore, existing studies tend to focus primarily on high-profile leader; it would be interesting to explore whether empathy's role in middle management and frontline supervisors directly impact everyday employee interactions. Studies suggest that these roles are pivotal for shaping organizational culture and fostering team cohesion (Côté & Miners, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2003), yet the specific contributions of empathy in these positions remain largely unexplored. Addressing this gap is crucial for developing a comprehensive understanding of how empathy can be cultivated and leveraged across all levels of leadership.

Moreover, although empathy is a frequent topic of research as a general construct, I have observed that rarely studies examine its components, cognitive and affective empathy and their distinct impacts on leadership practices. Understanding the differences between these types of empathy is essential, as cognitive empathy relates to understanding others' perspectives, while affective empathy involves sharing their emotional states (Stueber, 2006; Batson, 1991). Few studies have investigated how different types of empathy affect specific aspects of leadership,

such as decision-making, conflict resolution and team cohesion (Stueber, 2006; Batson, 1991). By focusing on these distinctions, my analysis aims to provide a more granular understanding of how empathy operates in various leadership contexts. The relevance of addressing these gaps cannot be overstated. My analysis seeks to move beyond the limitations of current research by systematically exploring empathy's role in leadership through measurable data, incorporating both cognitive and affective components, and evaluating its effects not only among high-profile leaders but also across middle management and operational supervisors. By examining empathy within diverse organizational contexts, this research will offer actionable insights that are directly applicable to leaders across industries and levels of responsibility. Additionally, it will contribute to a richer understanding of empathy as a leadership construct, providing valuable guidance for organizations aiming to develop empathetic leaders capable of driving sustainable success.

Chapter II

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Objective and research question

Leadership is one of the most important aspects of organizational success, although many traditional leadership models often prioritize authority and decision-making above interpersonal dynamics. As referenced previously in this thesis, recent research and case studies show that the ability to lead with empathy can transform leaders as well as organizations.

This project aims at defining the multiple faces of empathy in leadership based on the data obtained by analysing two concrete examples of companies that currently operate in Italy, and one agency that operates in Spain.

In particular, the main goal is to assess how empathy is perceived and experienced in an organizational context by both leaders and their followers. It includes an analysis of how leaders use empathy in their own leadership, how followers respond to the empathetic behaviour of

their leader and which variables influence them. Understanding these perceptions will provide a clearer picture of empathy's significance in encouraging effective leadership.

More specifically, an important aspect to examine is the impact of empathy on critical leadership processes like decision-making. For many years, empathy has been viewed as an essential tool for acting in complex situations, particularly those involving team dynamics, conflict and change management. The objective of this research is to reveal how leaders utilize empathy in decision-making process that directly impact their teams and how this approach contributes to outcomes such as employee satisfaction, trust and active engagement. Similarly, the study analyses the role of empathy in resolving conflicts and providing constructive feedback. The research therefore seeks to clarify whether leaders with high empathy are more effective in managing and supporting their teams by fostering harmony and promoting individual and collective growth.

Additionally, this thesis examines how empathetic leadership broader affects employee engagement. Empathic leadership is widely associated with creating a supportive environment that drives motivation and job satisfaction among team members. This study investigates whether more empathy-driven behaviours are associated with higher levels of employee engagement and greater organizational health.

Moreover, the research wants to compare habits and perspectives on empathy across different leadership levels, ranging from top-level executives to middle managers. It focuses on the perception and demonstration of empathy at various levels of the organisation, giving a detailed perspective on the role of empathy in organisational hierarchy. This comparison proves particularly useful in determining whether the importance of empathy varies based on the context or scope of a leader's responsibilities.

In addition, the study aims to examine the extent to which leaders adapt their leadership styles to the needs of their teams and individuals and how they use empathy. This adaptability is essential for meeting varied employee demands and building an inclusive culture at work. Empathy often serves as a bridge for leaders to connect with their teams, fostering trust and mutual understanding

Finally, the research aims to contribute to the existing literature on empathy in leadership by addressing major gaps in the previous research. While much of the existing research emphasizes the theoretical value of empathy, there is limited empirical evidence on how

empathy operates in real-world organizational settings. This investigation is designed to fill that space by providing both quantitative information and qualitative narratives of lived experience based on the experience of leaders and employees. The contribution to knowledge is significant because it addresses a growing need for human-centred leadership in a rapidly evolving and often volatile business environment; it aligns with societal and cultural shifts towards the concepts of inclusivity, mental health and well-being and it provides actionable insights for leaders and organizations to adopt empathy as a strategic and ethical approach to leadership.

To guide the research, the following central questions has been formulated:

- How does empathy influence leadership effectiveness and employee satisfaction across various organizational contexts? –

- How is empathy distributed among leaders, and how is it experienced and applied in leadership practices? -

2.2. Research approach description

To investigate empathy in leadership, this study introduces mixed methods research, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how empathy is distributed, experienced and applied within leadership contexts. A combination of numerical data and qualitative narratives make it possible to ensure both spread and depth in addressing the research objectives.

The mixed methods approach guarantees that the study benefits from the resources of both quantitative and qualitative analysis. While the questionnaire provides measurable data on empathy's distribution among leaders, the interviews offer depth and context, enhancing how empathy acts in practice. This combination results in a coherent framework to respond to the central research questions.

By triangulating data from these two methods, the study will provide a more solid and detailed understanding of empathy's role in leadership.

2.2.1. Quantitative methods: empathy questionnaire - Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)

In the quantitative part of this research, I utilised the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). It represents one of the most respected and longest-used psychological tools which allows for a nuanced and multi-faceted understanding of empathy.

In 1980, behavioural researcher Mark H. Davis created the IRI as a multidimensional measure of empathy, with the first model described in his seminal article *Measuring Individual Differences in Empathy: Evidence for a Multidimensional Approach* (Davis, 1983). The IRI was developed to meet an emerging need for a global measure that would take into account the multifaceted nature of empathy.

At that time, empathy was seen and examined as unidimensional topic, and measures did not consider its multidimensional nature. Before the development of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), many empirical tools did not differentiate between cognitive and emotional components of empathy. Some key tools and concepts that were commonly used at the time were:

- Hogan Empathy Scale (1969) - this measure assesses cognitive empathy with an emphasis on the ability to take the perspective of another person. Although influential, it was later criticized for its limited scope, as it failed to address emotional components of empathy (Hogan, 1969).
- Mehrabian and Epstein's Emotional Empathy Scale (1972) - on the contrary, this was an emotional empathy scale measuring an individual's ability to respond emotionally to the experiences of others. Although it provided valuable insights, it did not balance its focus with capturing the cognitive aspect of empathy (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972).
- Empathic tendency scales - early researches, such as Daniel Batson's one, on the situational and dispositional nature of empathy did not contain reliable and standardized tools for measurement. They were intended for particular studies rather than for general use and were more experimental (Batson, 1991).
- Therapeutic empathy measures – based on Carl Rogers's work in the 1940s and 1950s, tools in this domain were used primarily in clinical and therapeutic settings. These measures evaluated a therapist's capacity to experience empathy with patients, essential

to Rogers's client-centred therapy. However, they were not meant for application outside clinical contexts or leadership research (Rogers,1951).

IRI development was a major step forward: it was the first instrument to structure the cognitive and emotional dimensions within one global, multi-dimensional conceptualization.

However, Davis's work was inspired by the earlier theories. The confluence of these influences led to a measure that addressed the limitations of its predecessors and soon became one of the most widely used research tools in psychology, health-care and organizational behaviour.

The IRI is a 28-item measure of empathy that includes four subscales which represent the cognitive and emotional aspects of empathy:

- Perspective taking, which assesses the inclination to adopt the perspective of others in social situations.
- Empathic concern, which relates to how someone feels compassion and care for others in distress.
- Personal distress, an assessment of self-focused feelings of discomfort about others discomfort.
- Fantasy refers to the capacity to identify with characters found in books, movies or plays (Davis, 1983; Sand, 1983).

All items in each subscale are rated using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Does not describe me well" to "Describes me very well". The IRI multi-dimensional structure enables empirical studies that isolate specific empathy-related traits, especially between cognitive and emotional components and other leadership behaviours.

Over the years, the IRI has been essential in different fields. In organizational contexts, it has been applied to examine the relationships between empathy and leadership effectiveness, employee satisfaction and team dynamics (Gentry et al., 2007). In healthcare, it has been used to guide research on patient-caregiver relationships (Hojat, 2007), while in psychology, it contributes to the understanding of empathy deficits in condition like autism spectrum disorder or psychopathy (Decety & Meyer, 2008; Dziobek et al., 2008). Its reliability and validity, proven over decades of research, has made it adaptable to a range of cultural and professional settings.

The IRI is particularly relevant to studies of leadership because it encompasses the multifaceted function of empathy in interpersonal and professional relationships. It has been used to examine the impact of altruism on leadership effectiveness, to study how empathic qualities affect team interactions and decision-making processes and to analyse the effect of empathy on employee satisfaction level and on organisational culture.

For this research, the IRI and some related questions were applied to 138 participants from three different organizational settings. One group included employees in a hotel and restaurant company with various hundreds of staff members. This context is ideal for investigating empathy in a relational and service-oriented context, where interpersonal interactions significantly influence both customer and employee experiences. The second group included employees of a small fire prevention company with 16 staff members. This context provides a different perspective, focusing empathy dynamics in a small technical workforce. The third group involved a Spanish agency specializing in event and trip organization within the tourism sector, employing 21 young individuals. This setting provides an insight to empathy within the creative fast-paced working environment in which collaboration and innovative thinking solves many of our day-to-day challenges of delivering work to client expectations.

In each case, the IRI provides a comprehensive distribution of empathy by level and role among leaders. The quantitative analysis of the questionnaire results will use descriptive statistics to summarize demographics and empathy scores; comparative analysis to contrast differences between leaders' self-assessments and followers' perceptions of empathy scores and also to contrast differences between the three organizations; and correlation analysis to show the relationships between empathy scores and demographic variables. The findings will help contextualize empathy as a leadership skill and its spread, demonstrating how it shapes interactions, decisions and organizational culture in distinct professional environments. The selected participants included individuals in leadership positions and team members in order to get a complete representation of levels of empathy within the hierarchy.

2.2.2. Qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews – Behavioural Event Interview (BEI).

This study includes qualitative methods to complete the quantitative findings and reveal how empathy is experienced and used in leadership. Semi-structured behavioural event interviews allow for rich, detailed insights that numbers alone cannot capture.

Semi-structured interviews (SSIs) play an important role in qualitative research methodology, incorporating both structured and unstructured components. This enables researchers to focus on particular issues, but still have the openness to follow up on any themes that arise as the conversation progresses. This flexibility makes SSIs particularly useful for obtaining different contextual information that cannot be obtained with rigid formats. Their significance arises from their ability to synthesize the comparability across participants with the depth and nuance of open-ended questioning, allowing researchers to investigate greater detail into participants experiences, perceptions and meanings (Brinkmann, 2013, Kallio 2016,).

Semi-structured interviews are beneficial especially for topics which need complex data on human understanding behaviour, emotions or social interaction. They offer a template of already-implemented questions or points of discussion, while simultaneously enabling free-flowing conversation so that participants may share detailed narratives. They have the ability to delve deeper on unexpected insights, clarify ambiguities and adapt questions to suit the interviewee's context (Dearnley, 2005; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This is particularly advantageous in research that involves different participants or examines phenomena in their natural contexts, such as in the social sciences, health care and organisational research.

Moreover, semi-structured interviews can be used to compare answers between the respondents. The consistent use of an interview guide ensures some level of standardization, facilitating thematic or comparative analysis, while the open-ended format allows for diverse perspectives to emerge (King & Horrocks, 2010). This combination of flexibility with comparability quality makes SSIs complementary in mixed methods research, where qualitative depth and quantitative breadth are desired.

For instance, in leadership studies, researchers use semi-structured interviews to explore leaders' behaviours and attitudes in the context of complex organisational settings, exploring how their experience inform decision-making, team dynamics and outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Likewise in healthcare, SSIs are utilized to probe patient-caregiver relations since they capture both factual and emotional elements (Gill et al., 2008).

The concept of semi-structured interviews emerged in the mid-twentieth century since social sciences evolved and expanded their methodological approaches. While structured interviews already existed, researchers recognized their limitations in capturing the full depth of human

experience. The semi-structured format was developed as a response to the limitations of structured interviews and the chaotic nature of unstructured discussion (Brinkmann, 2013).

The systematic development of SSIs is credited largely to anthropologists and sociologists of the mid-1900s. Culture played a major role in George Devereux's (1950s) first formulation of flexibility in interviews (Devereux, 1967), while Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) influenced open-ended questioning techniques. These scholars set the stage for the combination of open-ended questions and guided investigation which became a core part of ethnographic work.

Grounded Theory, developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss between the 1970s and the 1980s, made systematic and flexible data collection techniques popular. Their approach highlighted the value of using SSIs to uncover emergent themes and guarantee theoretical relevance (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). By the 1980s, the method became standard practice in qualitative research, with its most popular applications in psychology, anthropology and education.

Nowadays, semi-structured interviews still constitute a central aspect of qualitative inquiry, always adapted to the changing needs of research. Therefore, their continuing significance acts as a bridge between structure and spontaneity, allowing for both rigor and richness in research findings (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

For this research, a purposive sample of 6 leaders from different levels are selected from three industries to ensure diverse perspectives. The interviews follow a semi-structured format, combining prepared questions with flexibility to explore emerging themes.

Moreover, in this study, BEIs are central to exploring the role of empathy in leadership and organizational effectiveness. Behavioural Event Interview (BEI) is a qualitative research method that is extremely useful when studying competencies, skills and behaviours that are illustrated in key moments. BEIs aim to obtain richer, real-life examples of past behaviours so that researchers can find patterns and hypothesize key competencies. They are rooted in observable, contextualized behaviours, rather than in global, subjective or hypothetical scenarios (McClelland, 1998; Spencer & Spencer, 1993), this represents their strongest advantage as a mechanism for data collection.

BEIs have a special importance in the area of leadership research. This approach identifies particular behaviours that lead to successful or unsuccessful performance by looking at how

people act during critical events. BEIs are distinguished from other interview formats, which focus on abstract qualities or hypothetical situations. They provide actionable evidence, enabling researchers to connect past behaviour with future performance. BEIs have also been used in organizational contexts to define key leadership competencies, to create training programs and to enhance recruitment (Boyatzis, 1982).

This method enables the collection of detailed data on how leaders and team members respond to specific, stressful situations. For instance, BEIs reveal how leaders show empathy when during conflict resolution or decision-making, even under extreme pressure, or when providing support to employees. These data help researchers identify empathy as a measurable competency and analyse its impact on leadership effectiveness, team dynamics and employee satisfaction.

BEIs are particularly useful for comparing behaviours within two different organizational contexts. By focusing on real-world examples, they provide a richer understanding of empathy in different settings and through different roles.

The BEI approach was developed by David C. McClelland, Harvard psychologist, in the early 1970s as part of his research on competency-based approaches to assessment and selection. McClelland questioned the validity of traditional intelligence and aptitude tests, claiming they were often poor predictors of success in the real world. He suggested that observable competencies, skills and behaviours specifically related to job performance were more successful predictors than abstract measures such IQ (McClelland, 1973).

The BEI technique was developed as a specific tool for implementing this competence-based approach. BEIs were created to capture in-depth narratives of past behaviours, allowing researchers to analyse the competencies demonstrated during those events. Lyle and Signe Spencer further refined this method in their seminal book *Competence at Work: Models for Superior Performance* (1993). While many early applications of BEI were focused at a specific industry or job level, the Spencer and Spencer formalized the framework of BEI emphasizing its value in identifying competencies across industries and roles.

BEIs nowadays are widely used in organizational psychology, leadership research and human resources. They have been used in various aspects of HR, including recruitment, performance evaluation and competency modelling, and have also been adopted across a range of industries from healthcare to finance around the world. The enduring relevance of BEIs lies in their focus

on evidence-based, context-specific behaviours, and not just in general constructs, allowing them to be useful when working with complex, dynamic constructs such as empathy.

The questions asked during the behavioural event interviews are designed to encourage participants to share comprehensive, contextualized descriptions of their past experiences in dealing with particular situations in their jobs. The interviews prompt participants to think through decision making, conflict resolution and relationship management, offering a deeper look into the application of empathy in leadership. The choice of questions, which are not rigidly structured but serve as a guide, helps uncover specific behaviours and attitudes, to deliver relevant and detailed information about behaviours and opinions.

The interviews, with consent, are audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. I used thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, unique insights and illustrative anecdotes.

Qualitative results will complete the study by adding practical illustrations of empathy in practice, revealing personal experiences and emotional insights that quantitative data cannot address, and providing a contextual understanding of how leaders adapt their empathy to different contexts.

2.3. Sample selection

The selection of an appropriate sample is essential to obtain a balanced and accurate understanding of the research objectives.

As previously mentioned, this study employs both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine empathy in leadership, incorporating data from leaders and employees at different organizational levels across two Italian companies and a Spanish agency. One of the organizations examined is a restaurant-hotel group working in Jesolo (Italy) that, during the high season, employs approximately 400 staff members across various departments, including reception, housekeeping, HR, marketing, restaurant and maintenance. For this research, I focused specifically on two departments, reception and restaurant, since these employees have direct interactions with their middle managers as well as the owner of the group. To ensure more reliable responses, I selected fixed employees as the reference population since they have a longer tenure and experience of working with their leaders. Consequently, the survey was distributed to 144 individuals.

The survey was sent to a fire prevention company operating in Venice, Italy (16 employees), and to a travel and event organization agency in Granada, Spain (21 young employees). I specifically chose organizations that vary in size and structure to understand how these characteristics influence leadership dynamics and the role of empathy. Including employees, middle managers and owners/leaders from all three organizations, the population for this study corresponds to 183 respondents. This varied population, allows for a deeper exploration of empathy in leadership practices and its effects across different organizational structures and cultural settings.

For qualitative phase, I chose 6 respondents: the group owner (1), the fire prevention company manager (1), the agency owner (1) and mid-managers (3). These respondents took part in semi-structured Behavioural Event Interviews (BEI), meant to capture leadership practices and empathy-driven narratives.

By combining a large quantitative sample with a targeted qualitative subset, this research balances statistical generalizability with rich, contextual insights. In particular, the heterogeneity of roles, organizational sizes and employee demographics provide opportunities to better understand how empathy is felt and expressed across various workplace contexts and leadership levels.

2.4. Data analysis methods

As previously seen, to address the research objectives, this study adopts a mixed-method approach to explore both quantitative and qualitative data. This methodological choice ensures a comprehensive understanding by combining statistical rigor with context-specific insights into the role of empathy in leadership.

The quantitative data was collected through a survey made with Google Form, and subsequently analysed with a statistical software, Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics were utilized to summarize the sample's demographic characteristics and other important variables such as empathy. Descriptive statistics included measures such as means and standard deviations to offer an overall of the data. The study also provides comparative analyses to evaluate the differences between leaders' self-assessments and followers' perceptions, and inconsistency across the three participating companies, offering insights into sector-specific dynamics.

Techniques such as Pearson correlation analysis were used to determine whether demographic factors influence empathy scores.

Semi-structured Behavioural Event Interviews were recorded with my personal mobile phone and transcribed through TurboScribe, an online AI transcription service. Qualitative data, obtained from the interviews, were examined by thematic analysis. This particular method offers a systematic way of coding patterns of meaning in the data. Data analysis used the six steps of Braun and Clarke: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, reporting. Key themes explored include empathetic decision-making, conflict resolution, employee support, and the evolution of leadership styles. The structure of the interviews allowed for comparisons between leader and middle-manager perspectives, highlighting similarities and divergences in the perception of empathy in workplace interactions.

A triangulation approach was utilized to combine quantitative and qualitative data to enhance the validity of the findings. Quantitative results provide a broad overview of trends and relationships, while qualitative analysis added depth and context, illustrating how empathy manifests in leadership practice. Collectively, these approaches enrich the understanding of the impact of empathy in different organizational settings and levels of leadership.

Chapter III

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Presentation of the collected quantitative data - empathy score

To examine the influence of empathy on leadership, with a special focus on the two aspects of how leaders apply their empathy and how followers perceive it in their leaders, quantitative data for this study were drawn through an online questionnaire-administered survey (*Appendix A: Empathy Questionnaire*). The objective is to investigate differences across cultural and organizational settings, as well as across genders and to determine if higher levels of empathy are associated with higher levels of overall job satisfaction. The questionnaire included either close-ended questions with Likert scales and demographic questions aimed at obtaining a representative sample.

I distributed the survey to both followers and leaders across the three industries, with the goal of understanding their perceptions, experiences and use of empathy in workplace settings. The nature of the survey changes based on whether the respondents are employees or leaders.

The first step of this chapter is to provide a summary of the quantitative data set, with a focus on empathy scores measured through the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI).

The questionnaire consisted of the following sections:

- Demographics: gender, age, industry and whether respondents are leaders or followers
- Empathy: leaders' IRI self-report and followers' assessment on leaders' empathy levels. The dimensions assessed included empathic concern, perspective taking, personal distress and fantasy, drawn from established empathy research frameworks.
- Leadership behaviours: questions assessing the implementation of empathic behaviours in leadership, such as active listening to people, being aware of the emotional state of people and supporting and guiding the team.
- Outcomes: employees' perceived impact of empathic leadership on their performance.

Out of the 183 distributed surveys, 138 responses were collected, and 3 responses were considered invalid for analysis, resulting in a sample size of 135 (103 from the restaurant-hotel group, 10 from the fire protection company and 22 from the Spanish agency), among which 11 correspond to leaders (of which 3 owners and 8 department directors) and 124 to followers. Responses were collected anonymously to ensure reliability and minimize bias. Empathy scores were computed as averages for each of the four dimensions on a 5-point Likert scale.

3.2. Quantitative data analysis

3.2.1. Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise sample characteristics and some key trends as the first step in the analysis of the data collected.

Descriptive statistics are a type of statistics that is used to summarize, organize and interpret data in a meaningful way. This type of statistical analysis provides a clear and concise overview of a dataset by using numerical measures such as central tendency (mean, median, mode), variability (range, variance, standard deviation) and distribution (frequency, skewness, kurtosis). Descriptive statistics lie only in the territory of pure data description: they are not generalizing beyond the dataset in question.

Basic descriptive statistics have several general functions:

- Summarization of data, they compress big datasets into easier numerical summaries.
- Visualization, descriptive statistics are often accompanied by graphical representations, such as histograms, bar charts and box plots, that visually summarize the patterns in the data.
- Finding patterns, they assist with exposing trends, differentials or anomalies in the data that require further analysis.
- Baseline information, descriptive statistics serve as a preliminary analysis that sets the foundation for more in-depth inferential statistical methods such as hypothesis testing.

In social sciences, for example, descriptive statistics can help determine how empathy varies by gender, role or organizational context before moving to inferential analysis.

In the evolution of statistical theory and practices, descriptive statistics have their roots in ancient civilizations which used basic data collection for administrative and economic records. Descriptive statistics first appeared in primitive forms in ancient Egypt, Babylon and China, where data collection was used for census and taxation, and for determining the allocation of resources. As an example, early census information in Egypt provided basic summaries of population and financial data (Watson, 2002).

The term “statistics” derived from the Latin *statisticum collegium*, meaning a council of state. Statistics were integrated into state governance during this period, associated with demographics, population and mortality trends.

Statistical concepts became more formalized during the 18th century as probability theory was developed by scholars such as Blaise Pascal and Pierre-Simon Laplace. This period saw the origin of descriptive measures, such as mean and standard deviation, particularly through the work of Carl Friedrich Gauss, who described the normal distribution and introduced the least squares method (Milton and Young, 2021), and Karl Pearson, who introduced other measures: standard deviation and correlation coefficient (Stanton, 2001).

Later in time, Francis Galton played an important role in moving descriptive statistical methods into the realm of social science and biology. He invented the median and contributed to the

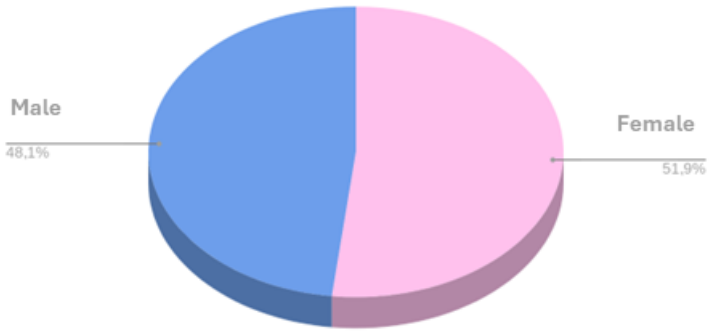
origin of the interquartile range as a measure of variability. His work on anthropometry was based on aggregation of physical data from large populations (Galton 1889).

Therefore, throughout the 20th century, descriptive statistics became an essential part of research associated to all the disciplines. These methods became widely accessible due to the standardization of methods, including statistical software to implement the techniques. Figures as Ronald Fisher (1992) gave even further contributions to the science by emphasizing graphical methods and data summaries.

In a research context assessing empathy levels, descriptive statistics could contain a summary of participants' demographics, empathy scores, averages and response variation and trends across demographic or organizational parameters.

In this study, the mode of age of participants was 18-26 years, the weighted average of age (taking into account the intermediate values of the age ranges) is 30 years (SD = 11,27), with 51,85% (70) identifying as female and 48,15% (65) as male as shown in Graph 1.

Graph 1: Gender of the respondents



The following data reflect the overall self-reported empathy scores of leaders across the four dimensions derived from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI).

- Perspective taking: M (mean) = 3.14; SD (standard deviation) = 1.20
- Empathic concern: M = 3.76; SD = 1.07

- Fantasy: M = 3.31; SD = 1.23
- Personal distress: M = 2.44; SD = 1.22

The overall self-reported scores for leaders indicate moderate levels of perspective taking (M = 3.14, SD = 1.20), empathic concern (M = 3.76, SD = 1.07) and fantasy (M = 3.31, SD = 1.23) and significantly lower levels for personal distress (M = 2.44, SD = 1.22).

The self-reported empathy scores of leaders were later analysed in detail, including specific mean scores and standard deviations for each empathy dimension. To better understand the variations in empathy across organizational settings and leadership roles, the data was segmented as follows:

- Leader/owner of the Spanish agency
  - Perspective taking: M = 2.57; SD = 1.13
  - Empathic concern: M = 3.43; SD = 0.79
  - Fantasy: M = 2.29; SD = 0.49
  - Personal distress: M = 2; SD = 1

The male leader of the Spanish travel and event agency reported relatively low scores in perspective taking (M = 2.57, SD = 1.13) and fantasy (M = 2.29, SD = 0.49), suggesting limited cognitive and imaginative empathy. However, his empathic concern score (M = 3.43, SD = 0.79) indicates moderate emotional engagement. Notably, his personal distress score (M = 2, SD = 1) reflects resilience under emotional tension.

- Leader/owner of the fire prevention company
  - Perspective taking: M = 2.57; SD = 0.79
  - Empathic concern: M =3.71; SD = 0.49
  - Fantasy: M = 4.29; SD = 1.11
  - Personal distress: M = 3.14; SD = 1.46

The female leader of the fire prevention company showed a distinct empathy profile, with high fantasy scores (M = 4.29, SD = 1.11) and moderate empathic concern (M = 3.71, SD = 0.49). These scores highlight her imaginative engagement and emotional connection to others.

However, her perspective taking score (M = 2.57, SD = 0.79) is relatively low and her personal distress score (M = 3.14, SD = 1.46) suggests a higher emotional vulnerability.

- Leader/owner of the restaurant-hotel group
  - Perspective taking: M = 1.86; SD = 1.46
  - Empathic concern: M = 5; SD = 0
  - Fantasy: M = 4.29; SD = 1.11
  - Personal distress: M = 2.71; SD = 2.14

The male leader of the restaurant-hotel group associates himself with extremely high empathic concern (M = 5, SD = 0), highlighting a profound emotional connection to others, appropriate in a hospitality-focused organization. His high fantasy score (M = 4.29, SD = 1.11) suggests a strong imaginative capacity, beneficial for understanding guests' experiences and fostering creative solutions. However, his low perspective taking score (M = 1.86, SD = 1.46) indicates limited cognitive empathy, which may hinder strategic decision-making or an ability to consider team perspectives effectively. His moderate personal distress score (M = 2.71, SD = 2.14) reflects some susceptibility to emotional strain, which could arise from the high demands of managing a large, people-focused organization.

- All leaders of the restaurant-hotel group (including owner and both genders middle managers)
  - Perspective taking: M = 3.34; SD =1.20
  - Empathic concern: M = 3.91; SD = 1.05
  - Fantasy: M = 3.37; SD = 1.21
  - Personal distress: M = 2.44; SD = 1.21

When examining all leaders within the restaurant-hotel group, the results present a balanced empathy profile. Perspective taking (M = 3.34, SD = 1.20) and fantasy (M = 3.37, SD = 1.21) are moderate, empathic concern (M = 3.91, SD = 1.05) is a little higher. The personal distress score (M = 2.44, SD = 1.21) remains low, suggesting that the leadership team collectively balances emotional engagement with emotional resilience. These results suggest that middle managers

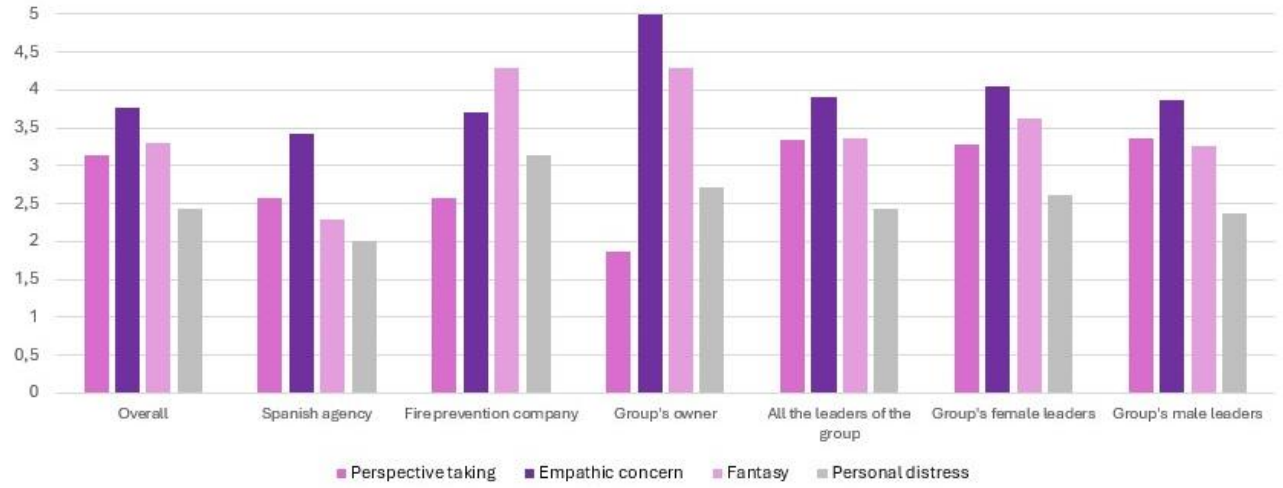
complement the owner's empathy dimensions, filling gaps where cognitive empathy may be weaker.

- All female middle managers of the restaurant-hotel group
  - Perspective taking: M = 3.29; SD = 1.19
  - Empathic concern: M = 4.05; SD = 0.67
  - Fantasy: M = 3.62; SD = 1.12
  - Personal distress: M = 2.62; SD = 1.36
- All male leaders of the restaurant-hotel group (including owner and middle managers)
  - Perspective taking: M = 3.37; SD = 1.22
  - Empathic concern: M = 3.86; SD = 1.24
  - Fantasy: M = 3.27; SD = 1.24
  - Personal distress: M = 2.37; SD = 1.15

The empathy scores of female middle managers within the restaurant-hotel group stand out for their high empathic concern (M = 4.05, SD = 0.67) which point to strong emotional empathy. Their moderate perspective taking score (M = 3.29, SD = 1.19), middle-high fantasy score (M = 3.62, SD = 1.12) and lower personal distress (M = 2.62, SD = 1.36) further support a profile that balances relational and operational leadership capabilities. In contrast, male leaders exhibit slightly higher perspective taking (M = 3.37, SD = 1.22) but lower empathic concern (M = 3.86, SD = 1.24) and fantasy (M = 3.27, SD = 1.24). These differences may reflect gender-based tendencies in leadership styles, with women prioritizing emotional connections and men focusing on cognitive understanding.

Segmenting empathy scores by role, gender and organizational context, as illustrated in Graph 2, reveals key dynamics of how empathy interact in the context of leadership. Understanding these nuances helps identify strengths and gaps within specific leadership profiles.

Graph 2: Leaders' self-reported empathy scores - Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)

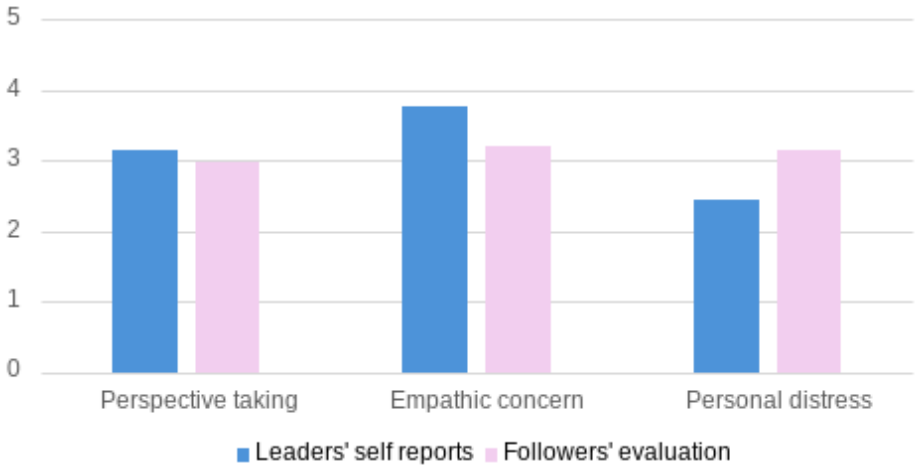


The employees were asked to rate their leaders on empathy, revealing distinct patterns across the dimensions of empathy as measured by the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). Overall, followers scored their leaders on perspective taking, empathic concern and personal distress as follows:

- Perspective Taking: M = 2.99, SD = 1.03
- Empathic concern: M = 3.20, SD = 0.95
- Personal Distress: M = 3.15, SD = 1.13

Graph 3 reports the differences between leaders' self-perceptions and their followers' evaluations.

Graph 3: Differences between leaders' self-perceptions and followers' evaluation



The perspective taking dimension, which represents a leader's capacity to see from others perspectives, had an average score of 2.99 (SD = 1.03), which indicates that followers see their leaders as largely moderate perspective-takers. The relatively large standard deviation also suggests variability in responses: some leaders may excel in these scenarios while others struggle to consistently consider their followers' viewpoints.

For empathic concern, which assesses the ability of a leader to care and show compassion for employees, the average score was a little higher (M = 3.20, SD = 0.95), but lower than the one revealed by the leaders' self-assessment. It reveals that followers perceive their leaders as displaying a significant degree of care and concern for their well-being. The slightly lower standard deviation compared to the other dimensions indicates a more consistent perception among followers.

The dimension of personal distress, which describes self-oriented reactions of uncomfortable feelings or anxiety in reaction to stress in others (M = 3.15, SD = 1.13), highlights that leaders show average levels of personal distress in response to their team members in a crisis or a stressful situation. This could illustrate emotional sensitivity; however, it could also refer to a lack of emotional balance in some leaders potentially impacting their ability to offer stable direction in difficult times. The higher standard deviation reflects varied perceptions among followers, indicating differences in leaders' emotional responses to stress across the organizations studied.

3.2.2. Comparative analysis

Comparative analysis is a statistical approach used to identify and quantify the same trait among two or more different types of groups or observe differences between their variables to derive meaningful insights. It is a core method in research, used to find correlations, patterns, as well as hypotheses about how groups differ using a certain measure. The technique involves statistical procedures, such as t-tests, analysis of variance (ANOVA) or non-parametric alternatives, depending on the nature of the data and research questions. Comparative analysis facilitates the interpretation of how the effects of context or demographics on key outcomes change across socio-cultural context making it particularly relevant for applied fields like psychology, education and organizational research.

Comparative analysis is historically rooted in the foundational development of inferential statistics. In the first half of the 20th century, the work of Sir Ronald Fisher was instrumental in formalizing comparative statistical methodology, notably through the introduction of ANOVA in 1925 (Fisher, 1925). Fisher developed this method to compare the means of multiple groups simultaneously, thereby expanding the scope of analysis beyond simple pairwise comparisons. His seminal work *Statistical Methods for Research Workers* (1925) established a framework for the use of comparative statistics across a wide scope of experimental research, emphasizing its utility in agricultural, biological and psychological studies.

Before Fisher's contributions, the concept of comparing groups was primarily addressed through simpler techniques, such as the two-sample t-test, introduced by William Sealy Gosset under the pseudonym "Student" (Gosset, 1908). The t-test developed by Gosset was designed to handle small sample sizes, addressing practical research needs in fields like industrial quality control. These foundational methods set the stage for more sophisticated approaches, including modern comparative methods like multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and non-parametric techniques like the Mann-Whitney U test (Mardia et. al., 1979; Hald, 1998).

The significance of comparative analysis lies in its ability to provide empirical evidence for hypotheses. For instance, in psychology and social sciences, comparative methods are often employed to examine demographic group differences, such as gender and age, on outcomes such as empathy or cognitive ability. Statistical tests on these differences allow to move beyond anecdotal observations to establish patterns supported by data. This is especially

important in applied areas where data-driven evidence is used to guide interventions or policy choices.

Moreover, the method is important since it helps to understand the interactions in complex datasets. For example, comparative analysis in leadership studies may compare empathy scores between employees and managers across sectors. Such insights could target training programs or organizational development efforts to appropriate groups. Comparative methods are also useful in interdisciplinary research because they facilitate cross-domain integration to produce more comprehensive insights.

Nowadays, the utility of comparative analysis extends beyond academia. This method is common in business, healthcare and public policy to evaluate program effectiveness, identify disparities and guide resource allocation. Comparative analysis is employed in clinical trials in order to assess and contrast the effectiveness of various treatments, ensuring that medical interventions are based on evidence. Similarly, in education it could investigate the effectiveness of teaching methods on student performance, guiding curriculum development.

For this study, a comparative analysis was performed to:

- Compare leaders' self-assessment and followers' evaluation on each empathy dimensions through t-test,
- Investigate differences in empathy scores across organizational context through ANOVA

Data (some findings are reported earlier in the chapter):

→ Overall leaders' self-assessed scores

→ Leaders' self-assessed scores by organization

→ Overall followers' evaluations

→ Followers' evaluations by organization:

  - Spanish agency
    - Perspective taking: M = 2.29, SD = 1.16
    - Empathic concern: M = 2.64, SD = 0.97
    - Personal distress: M = 2.95, SD = 1.23

- Fire prevention company
  - Perspective taking: M = 3.41, SD = 1.08
  - Empathic concern: M = 3.54, SD = 0.93
  - Personal distress: M = 2.44, SD = 1.16
- Restaurant-hotel group
  - Perspective taking: M = 3.11, SD = 0.92
  - Empathic concern: M = 3.29, SD = 0.90
  - Personal distress: M = 3.27, SD = 1.08

Sample sizes:

- Leaders: n = 11
- Followers: n = 124

The t-test is used to determine whether there is a significant difference between the means of two groups. For this analysis, we will compare:

1. Leaders' self-assessments vs. overall followers' evaluations (Table 2).
2. Each leaders' self-assessments vs. followers' evaluations within each organization (Table 3).

As shown in Table 2, for each empathy dimension, I have calculated the t-statistic using the formula:

$$t = \frac{\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2}{\sqrt{\frac{SD_1^2}{n_1} + \frac{SD_2^2}{n_2}}}$$

Where:

$\bar{X}_1, SD_1, n_1$ represent mean, standard deviation and sample size for leaders;

$\bar{X}_2, SD_2, n_2$ represent mean, standard deviation and sample size for followers.

Table 2: Means and statistical significance coefficients - overall differences between leaders' and followers' perceptions ("*" indicates significance)

IRI dimension	Leaders' means	Leaders' SD	Followers' mean	Followers' SD	t	p
Perspective taking	3.14	1.20	2.99	1.03	0.46	0.6486
Empathic concern	3.76	1.07	3.20	0.95	1.86	0.0658
Personal distress	2.44	1.22	3.15	1.13	-1.98	0.0492*

For perspective taking, the leaders' self-assessment yielded a mean score of M = 3.14 (SD = 1.20), while followers' evaluations produced a slightly lower mean score of M = 2.99 (SD = 1.03). The t-test did not identify a statistically significant difference between these scores ($p > 0.05$), indicating relative alignment in this dimension.

For empathic concern, leaders rated themselves higher (M = 3.76, SD = 1.07) compared to followers' evaluations (M = 3.20, SD= 0.95). The t-test result ($p > 0.05$) suggests that while there is a slight tendency for leaders and followers to differ in their scores, the evidence is not strong enough to confirm this difference as statistically significant.

For personal distress, followers reported higher scores (M = 3.15, SD = 1.13) than leaders' self-assessment (M = 2.44, SD = 1.22). The t-test indicated a significant difference ($t(133) = -1.98$, $p < 0.05$), reflecting that followers perceive leaders to experience more emotional distress than leaders acknowledge. This misalignment could be indicative of stress transmission within the workplace, where followers may interpret leaders' behaviours as expressions of internal strain.

I have further applied the t-test to analyse empathy scores within specific organizational contexts. Results are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Means and statistical significance coefficients - organization-specific differences between leaders' and followers' perceptions ("*" indicates significance; "**" indicates high significance)

Organization	IRI dimension	Leaders' means	Leaders' SD	Followers' means	Followers' SD	t	p
Spanish agency	Perspective taking	2.57	1.13	2.29	1.16	0.77	0.4434
	Empathic concern	3.43	0.79	2.64	0.97	2.62	0.0098**
	Personal distress	2.00	1.00	2.95	1.23	-2.49	0.0141*
Fire prevention company	Perspective taking	2.57	0.79	3.41	1.08	-2.52	0.0130*
	Empathic concern	3.71	0.49	3.54	0.93	0.60	0.5512
	Personal distress	3.14	1.46	2.44	1.16	1.88	0.0627
Restaurant-hotel group	Perspective taking	3.34	1.20	3.11	0.92	0.77	0.4400
	Empathic concern	3.91	1.05	3.29	0.90	2.16	0.0325*
	Personal distress	2.44	1.21	3.27	1.08	-2.42	0.0169*

For the Spanish agency, for example, high significant differences ($p < 0.01$) emerged in empathic concern, with the leader rating himself higher ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.79$) than followers' evaluations ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.97$).

For the fire prevention company, a significant difference was found in perspective taking ($p < 0.05$), with followers reporting significantly higher levels than leaders self-assessed.

In the restaurant-hotel group, the t-test for perspective taking found no significant difference ($p > 0.05$) between the leaders ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.20$) and their followers ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.92$).

ANOVA tests whether there are significant differences in means across multiple groups. I have compared empathy scores across the three organizations as Table 4 demonstrates.

Null Hypothesis (H_0): the mean scores of each dimension do not differ among the Spanish agency, the fire prevention company and the restaurant-hotel group.

Calculate the F-statistic using the formula:

$$F = \frac{\text{variance between group}}{\text{variance within group}}$$

Table 4: Means and statistical significance coefficients - differences among different organizational settings

Dimension	F	p-value	Mean
Perspective taking	F(2,121) = 4.32	p < 0.05	Fire Prevention: 3.41
			Restaurant-Hotel: 2.85
			Spanish Agency: 2.29
Empathic concern	F(2,121) = 5.78	p < 0.01	Restaurant-Hotel: 3.29
			Fire Prevention: 2.93
			Spanish Agency: 2.64
Personal distress	F(2,121) = no significant differences	p > 0.05	--

For perspective taking, results revealed significant variation ($F(2,121) = 4.32$, $p < 0.05$). Followers in the fire prevention company rated their leader highest (M = 3.41), while those in the Spanish agency provided the lowest scores (M = 2.29). This trend may reflect the different demands of these industries.

Similarly, ANOVA results for empathic concern ($F(2,121) = 5.78$, $p < 0.01$) showed significant differences. The restaurant-hotel group received the highest evaluations (M = 3.29), likely

reflecting the emotional labour inherent in hospitality roles, while the Spanish agency scored lowest (M = 2.64). These findings underscore the importance of tailoring empathetic leadership practices to the emotional expectations of each industry.

For personal distress, ANOVA did not detect significant differences ($p > 0.05$) across organizations, suggesting that perceptions of distress may not be strongly influenced by industry context.

3.2.3. Correlation analysis

Correlation analysis is a statistical method that determines the strength and direction of the relationship between two variables (X, Y). This technique identifies whether the increase or decrease in one variable brings an increase or decrease in another one. The result of correlation analysis is typically expressed using a correlation coefficient, such as Pearson's r, which ranges from -1 to +1. A value that is close to +1 means that both variables grow together (perfect positive correlation), while a value that is close to -1 means that one variable increases as the other decreases (perfect negative correlation). If this value is very close to 0, it means that there is no linear relationship between the variables (no correlation).

Correlation analysis is a basic technique used in statistical research and applied in various fields including psychology, medicine, social sciences and business. Its primary use is to discover and describe patterns in data, helping researchers to identify relationships that may need to be investigated. For example, in psychological research, correlation analysis is often utilized to explore associations between personality traits, behaviours or cognitive processes. In business contexts, it could be applied to explore the relationship between employee engagement and productivity to get corporate leaders' valuable insights to improve their organization.

The origins of correlation analysis date back to the late 19th century, and are largely attributed to the pioneering work of Sir Francis Galton. Galton, a British mathematician and polymath, first contemplated the relationship between the traits of parent and sons in a study of heredity and introduced the concept of correlation (Galton, 1888). His work later led to the birth of Pearson's correlation coefficient, developed by Karl Pearson, who formalized the method in the early 20th century (Pearson, 1895). Pearson's coefficient remains one of the most widely used

measures of linear correlation and is essential in modern statistical analysis. These early contributions were critical in developing the correlation as a key technique in the study of relationship between variables, linking different fields such as biology, psychology and economics (Hald, 1998).

Correlation analysis gained prominence in psychology with the emergence of psychometrics and the study of individual differences. Researchers utilized correlation to analyse relationships between test scores and various behavioural or cognitive outcomes, contributing to the development of psychological assessments and theories (Spearman, 1904). Today, correlation analysis became important in sociology and economics to examine societal trends and economic phenomena, such as the relationship between income and education levels (Fisher, 1925).

Over the years, the method has been significantly improved, benefiting from advancements in statistical theory and computational tools. In addition to Pearson's r, contemporary correlation methods include a variety of approaches like Spearman's rank correlation for ordinal data (Spearman, 1904) and Kendall's tau for non-parametric relationships (Kendall, 1938). These variations address limitations of the original method, enabling researchers to analyse data that do not meet the assumptions of linearity or normality.

Correlation analysis is particularly valuable in generating hypotheses. It represents the starting point for researchers to explore possible associations that can subsequently be tested in experimental or longitudinal studies. For instance, a strong positive correlation between empathy scores and job performance, might results into the desire of further investigation on whether efforts that raise empathy levels are actually related to increased performance at the workplace. However, it is important to enhance that correlation does not imply causation. Correlation only reveals that there is a relationship between the two variables, and it does not define whether the change in one variable causes the change in another. This limitation underscores the importance of cautious interpretation and the need for complementary methods to establish causality (Pearson, 1895).

Correlation analysis is an essential statistical methodology in data-driven decision-making in modern research. In fields like healthcare, for example, it has been widely used to discover risk factors based on associations between lifestyle choices and health outcomes (Fisher, 1925). In

marketing, it informs strategies by examining relationships between consumer preferences and purchasing behaviour.

To gain a deeper understanding of the relationships between empathy dimensions and demographic variables, I performed a Pearson's r correlation analysis. This analysis was conducted with the objective of examining the possible relationships between empathy scores from the four IRI dimensions and age and gender. Understanding how certain demographic characteristics change with empathy score distributions offers further insights into how leaders' and followers' empathy traits develop and vary across contexts.

The variables examined were:

→ Empathy Dimensions

- Perspective taking (cognitive empathy)
- Empathic concern (emotional sensitivity)
- Fantasy (imaginative empathy)
- Personal distress (emotional reactivity)

→ Demographic Variables

- Age, measured as a continuous variable
- Gender, coded as a binary variable (1 = male, 2 = female).

The formula used is:

$$r = \frac{\sum(x - \bar{x})(y - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{\sum(x - \bar{x})^2 \sum(y - \bar{y})^2}}$$

Where:

x = empathy scores

y = demographic variables.

The analysis tested the following hypotheses:

1. Null hypothesis (H_0): there is no significant correlation between empathy dimensions and demographic variables.
2. Alternative hypothesis (H_a): there is a significant correlation between empathy dimensions and demographic variables.

Data: the sample for this analysis included N = 135 participants, with M_{age} = 30 years (SD = 11.27). Of the participants, 51,85% identified as female, while 48,15% identified as male. Mean empathy scores for the sample were the ones mentioned earlier in the chapter:

- Perspective taking: M = 3.14; SD= 1.20
- Empathic concern: M = 3.76; SD = 1.07
- Fantasy: M = 3.31; SD = 1.23
- Personal distress: M = 2.44; SD = 1.22

The analysis revealed several interesting patterns as displayed in Table 5:

Table 5: Means and statistical significance coefficients – correlations between empathy scores and age or gender ("*" indicates significance)

IRI dimensions	Mean	SD	r (age)	p-value (age)	r (gender)	p-value (gender)
Perspective taking	3.14	1.20	r = 0.23*	p < 0.05	r = -0.12	p > 0.05
Empathic concern	3.76	1.07	r = 0.18	p > 0.05	r = 0.26*	p < 0.05
Fantasy	3.31	1.23	r = -0.10	p > 0.05	r = 0.15	p > 0.05
Personal distress	2.44	1.22	r = 0.05	p > 0.05	r = 0.20*	p < 0.05

Empathy dimensions and age:

- Perspective taking (r = 0.23, p < 0.05): a weak but significant positive correlation was found between age and perspective taking, indicating that older individuals tend to score

slightly higher on cognitive empathy. This may reflect greater life experience and interpersonal exposure, which can enhance one's ability to understand others' perspectives.

- Empathic concern ($r = 0.18$, $p > 0.05$): I observed a weak positive correlation but not statistically significant, suggesting no strong link between age and emotional sensitivity.
- Fantasy ($r = -0.10$, $p > 0.05$): a weak, non-significant negative correlation was found, implying that younger participants might exhibit slightly higher imaginative empathy scores, perhaps reflecting youthful creativity and imagination.
- Personal distress ($r = 0.05$, $p > 0.05$): the near-zero correlation indicates no meaningful relationship between age and emotional reactivity.

Empathy dimensions and gender:

- Perspective taking ($r = -0.12$, $p > 0.05$): a weak, non-significant negative correlation does not draw definitive conclusions.
- Empathic concern ($r = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$): a moderate, statistically significant positive correlation shows that female participants tend to score higher in empathic concern. This aligns with previous research highlighting women's greater emotional sensitivity and capacity for compassion.
- Fantasy ($r = 0.15$, $p > 0.05$): a weak positive correlation is observed but is not statistically significant, suggesting no notable gender-based differences in imaginative empathy.
- Personal distress ($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$): a weak but significant positive correlation indicates that female participants may experience slightly higher levels of emotional reactivity, consistent with findings in emotional psychology.

3.3. Interpretation of the quantitative results in relation to the research question and existing literature

The quantitative analysis provides a detailed understanding of the multi-dimensional, nature of empathy and its role in leadership, addressing the research question, "*How is empathy distributed among leaders, and how is it experienced and applied in leadership practices?*". By descriptive statistics, correlation analyses and comparative methods, this study elucidate on a

number of critical patterns and associations that can expand the existing understanding of empathy in varied organizational contexts.

Leaders' self-reporting of empathic capabilities produced moderate averages across all four dimensions, but some trends emerged in the descriptive statistics:

- Perspective taking (M = 3.14; SD = 1.20) emerged as a cognitive strength but with notable variability.
- Empathic concern (M = 3.76; SD = 1.07) highlighted emotional engagement, consistently rated the highest dimension overall.
- Fantasy (M = 3.31; SD = 1.23) supports their tendency to relate to others in hypothetical situations.
- Personal distress (M = 2.44; SD = 1.22) showed the lowest scores, underscoring emotional resilience under stress.

This pattern indicates that the leaders have good emotional and imaginative empathy while maintain emotional stability. These findings are consistent with existing literature, particularly Goleman's (1995) theory of emotional intelligence, where empathy plays a critical role in leadership success.

The study found significant discrepancies between leaders' self-assessed empathy scores and followers' perceptions of their empathy. Even if not statistically significant, the dimension of perspective taking obtained different scores between leaders' self-assessment and followers' evaluation. Leaders often rated themselves higher on cognitive empathy, which indicates a potential overestimation of their abilities, or a limited feedback mechanisms to compare the self-perception with an external evaluation. This gap could underscore the need for formal feedback systems and leadership training initiatives that focus on self-awareness and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). Followers' lower ratings also highlight the importance of demonstrating empathy in ways that will actually reach team members. Servant leadership (Eva et al., 2018) and transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994) theories highlight empathic behaviours in the form of active listening and individualized consideration as the key mechanisms for establishing trust, cooperation and job satisfaction. To this end, closing the perception gap is essential in order to maximise the relational and organizational benefits of empathy.

Comparative analysis through ANOVA revealed significant differences in empathy scores among organizations, indicating that the nature of the industry can shape the level of empathy a leader has:

- Perspective taking: the leader of the fire prevention company was rated highest by followers (M = 3.41) highlighting the expectation of cognitive effort in technical and safety-critical industries. This kind of resonance aligns with theories that highlight context-specific leadership skills which recognize the salience of empathy as a leadership tool in the high-stakes environment as a tool for effective problem solving and decision-making (Bass & Avolio, 1994). By contrast, the Spanish agency leader got the lowest score (M = 2.29), reflecting the creative industry's prioritization of other empathy facets.
- Empathic concern: the restaurant-hotel group leaders achieved the highest average ratings from followers (M = 3.29) consistent with the emotional labour expectations of hospitality professions. It emphasizes the importance of interaction in customer-facing jobs. Leaders who are effective in demonstrating compassion are ideal for employees in this sector; demonstrating empathy are fundamental for industries related to service (Goleman, 1998; Kock et al., 2019). The lowest score corresponded again to the Spanish agency (M = 2.64), potentially due to operational pressures that undervalue emotional engagement.
- Personal distress: no significant differences were detected ($p > 0.05$), suggesting that emotional reactivity is not influenced by the nature of the organization.

Drawing upon situational leadership theories (Fiedler, 1967), these results underscore the contextual nature of empathy and the need to adapt empathetic practices to organizational demands (Gottfredson et al., 2019).

The correlation analysis examined relationships between demographic variables (age, gender) to empathy dimensions:

- A positive correlation of perspective taking with age ($r = 0.23$, $p < 0.05$) supports the idea that older leaders scored higher on cognitive empathy, possibly as a result of increased life experience. The older participants were better able to take the perspective of others, reflecting greater interpersonal experience and career maturation. The

findings are consistent with studies of emotional and social intelligence that show empathy grows with reflective attention and diverse exposure over time (Carlo et al., 2010). However, the low correlation coefficients of age with other empathy dimensions such as empathic concern and personal distress, suggest that emotional empathy may be less affected by the age. This observation raises questions about the general growth of empathy across all dimensions with age, suggesting that targeted interventions may be necessary to cultivate emotional empathy in professional contexts (Batson, 2011).

- Gender differences were observed, with females scoring higher on empathic concern and personal distress, compared to males, with statistically significant correlations in both dimensions. These findings align with existing literature, such as Eagly and Carli (2003), which suggest that women are more emotionally responsive, empathic and compassionate toward others. Such findings reinforce the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives into leadership training, particularly in fostering emotionally intelligent leadership styles. The weak negative correlation between gender and perspective taking, although not statistically significant, may suggest that men and women differ in their cognitive empathy. This result is consistent with research that argues for the complex interaction between cognitive and emotional empathy, suggesting cognitive empathy-based interventions for leadership might be more effective when tailored to gender differences (Lawrence et al., 2004).

The findings underscore the importance of demographic factors in shaping empathy, providing insights into how leadership traits develop over time and vary across genders.

Touching on another topic, empathy in cross-cultural settings is a particularly significant argument, since modern organizations have become more and more global and dealing with international teams is an important task for leaders. In my opinion, this topic deserves special attention as multicultural environments can have a profound influence on team dynamics, trust and the overall effectiveness of leadership as well.

The cross-cultural component of empathy appeared as a decisive domain in the analysis, especially when it came to leaders managing emotional flows in teams with deep cultural disparity. Responses to the Likert scale questions addressing whether leaders demonstrate understanding of cultural differences, exhibit culturally sensitive empathetic behaviour, and effectively apply empathy across diverse teams revealed a mean score of 3.98 with a standard

deviation of 0.85. This finding implies a generally favourable attitude toward cross-cultural empathy, but still reveals a space for improvement.

A mean close to 4 suggests that both leaders and followers recognize efforts to adapt empathetic behaviours to cultural contexts. This aligns with research on culturally intelligent leadership, which suggests the need to adjust communication style and emotional involvement to meet different team needs (Ang et al., 2007). A standard deviation of 0.85 suggests that there may be variability in responses, possibly reflecting instability in leaders' application of culturally sensitive practices. This variability may derive from different levels of cultural intelligence (CQ) among leaders, as suggested by Earley and Mosakowski (2004). Those with a higher CQ are able to recognize and respond to cultural nuances, increasing the potential to build trust and collaboration within diverse teams. In contrast, leaders with lower CQ may struggle to adapt their empathetic behaviours, leading to disparities in team perceptions.

In addition to that, two important questions in the study's questionnaire explored employees' perceptions of whether their leaders were empathetic, and how that empathy affected their level of job satisfaction and productivity. These questions provide critical insights into the employees' preferences and the practical implications of empathetic leadership within organizational contexts.

The first question, "*Would you prefer your leader to demonstrate more empathy in their interactions with the team*?", revealed a significant result: 84.68% of the interviewees said "yes", indicating a strong preference for leaders with a higher level of empathy, and only 15.32% responded "no" (as shown in Graph 4), perhaps representing the followers who already have an empathy high-scored leader, and consequently, are satisfied with his or her behaviours.

Graph 4: Percentage of employees preferring more empathy from their leaders

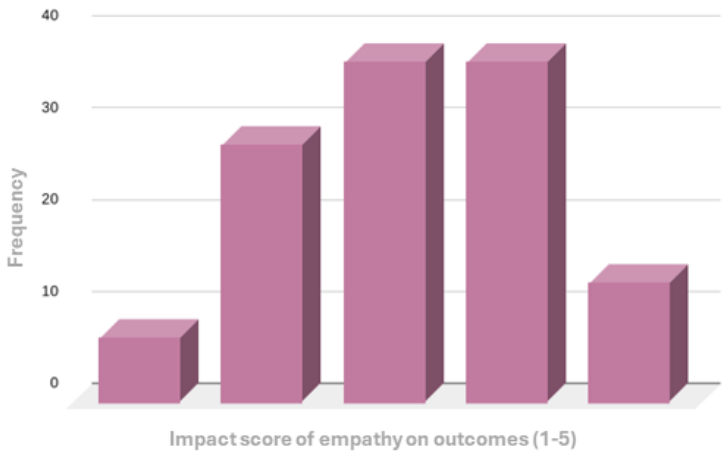
The overwhelming preference toward higher empathy suggests its importance to employees. This implies that workers, in a lot of conditions, may feel that their leaders' current levels of empathy are insufficient or could be enhanced to foster a more supportive and understanding workplace environment. The high percentage of affirmative responses is a clear signal that empathy is a valued and sought-after quality in leadership across all organizational settings represented in the study.

This finding is consistent with existing literature that highlights the role of empathy in enhancing leader-follower relationships. Goleman (1998) stated, for example, that empathy builds trust and improve effective communication, two features that are vital for successful leadership. Moreover, the strong preference for empathy suggests that employees may associate empathetic leadership with greater emotional well-being.

The second question, "*On a scale of 1 to 5, how does the empathy shown by your leader positively impact your job satisfaction and productivity?*", provides quantitative insights into how employees perceive the effectiveness of their leaders' empathy. The mean score for this question was M = 3.17 (SD = 1.08), indicating a moderate positive impact overall and showing that empathy does not have the same effect across all the respondents. This result implies that, while most employees acknowledge that their leaders' empathy positively influences their work experience, the level of impact may vary based on factors such as individual expectations, leadership style and organizational culture. As an example, empathy might be more important for employees in service-oriented industries rather than to those who have technical or safety-critical roles.

Graph 5 represents a histogram representing the distribution of scores for this question, showing the scale of different responses as well as the closeness of most scores to the mean.

Graph 5: Distribution of scores on leaders' empathy impacting employees' job satisfaction and outcomes



The moderate mean score raises important considerations. It may represent the fact that not all leaders are really great at practicing empathy or meeting all the expectations of the employees. Additionally, the variance in responses suggests that empathy may not be as equally impactful for all employees, perhaps due to differing individual needs or organizational dynamics.

The combined analysis of these two questions provides some valuable insights on the role of empathy in leadership. The strong preference for higher empathy (84.68% affirmative) is consistent with the moderate mean score (M = 3.17) for the impact of empathy on job satisfaction. The combination of these findings indicates that leaders are trying to demonstrate empathy, but there is a significant opportunity for improvement. Employees not only appreciate empathetic leadership but also recognize its tangible benefits for their work experience and productivity.

3.4. Research limits

Although this study offers important insights, some limitations should be acknowledged that may affect the results and their interpretation.

Using the fire prevention company and the tourism agency as examples, small sample sizes affect generalizability. Expanding the sample across similar organizations could provide more robust insights and improve statistical power.

Additionally, reliance on self-reported data through the IRI introduces potential biases, such as social desirability bias. Respondents may report greater levels of empathy than they actually feel or that they believe others have. Future research could mitigate this limitation by using behavioural measures or third-party ratings of empathy. The IRI is a validated tool. However, it may only measure dispositional empathy and not fully capture situational or behavioural expressions which are more relevant to the realm of leadership. Other tools like Multifaceted Empathy Test (MET) could be included which to have a more detailed understanding.

Moreover, different organizational contexts may introduce confounding variables, such as industry culture and job demand, which could independently impact empathy scores.

Furthermore, the results suggest the need for comprehensive leadership development programs that integrate cognitive and emotional empathy training. Targeted interventions should focus on:

- Self-awareness, encouraging leaders to align their self-perceptions with external feedback through reflective practices and 360-degree evaluations.
- Skill acquisition, increasing cognitive empathy through perspective-taking tasks and emotional empathy through active listening and compassion training.
- Contextual adaptation, developing industry-specific models to meet the demands of the various contexts organizations operate in.

These programs can help to close the perception gaps, enhance relational dynamics, and foster inclusive, empathetic leadership cultures.

In addition, cross-cultural comparison results highlight the need of training programs that focus on cross-cultural competencies. They should provide leaders with the tools to understand the similarities and differences in emotions and communication in an intercultural aspect. According to studies conducted by Livermore (2015), culturally intelligent leaders not only deal with diversity but also utilize diversity for innovative outputs and team synergy. Future research should also investigate contextual specificities on empathy and impact and reveal more practical recommendations for enhancing cross-cultural leadership competencies.

Finally, future studies could elaborate these findings by exploring the contextual factors that influence employees' perceptions of empathy, such as organizational culture, team dynamics or industry-specific demands.

Chapter IV

QUALITATIVE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Introduction to qualitative thematic analysis.

This chapter explores the qualitative data obtained from six Behavioural Event Interviews (BEIs) and aims to identify, analyse and interpret key themes that emerged from the conversations to provide rich, nuanced insights into the role of empathy in leadership, complementing the quantitative results discussed in Chapter 3. The qualitative component of this study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with six leaders from three organizations: the owner of a Spanish travel and event organization agency, the owner of an Italian fire prevention company, the owner of an Italian restaurant-hotel group and three of his restaurant-directors. This methodological approach allowed participants to reflect on their leadership experiences.

To achieve accuracy and reliability in the data collection process, the interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed through the platform TurboScribe, an online AI tool. Although the interviews followed a list of questions that I prepared, their semi-structured nature allowed the conversation to flow spontaneously and adapt to the participants' responses. Full

transcripts of the interviews are reported in *Appendix B: Transcriptions of Behavioural Event Interviews.* Interviews were based on the following questions:

1. Can you briefly describe your professional journey and how you arrived at your current position, limiting your response to a maximum of three of the most relevant steps?
2. How would you define your leadership style? Which are your guiding values?
3. When you think about empathy in the workplace context, how would you describe it?
4. How important is it for you to build and maintain good relationships with your staff? How do you think empathy plays a role in this?
5. Have you noticed any changes in the way you manage your team since you started?
6. Can you tell me about some episodes of employees struggling to handle stress at work? Were you able to understand the situation and support them? How?
7. Can you describe an occasion where you had to manage a conflict between your team members? How did you mediate and resolve the issue?
8. Can you tell me about a situation where you had to provide negative feedback to an employee? How did you balance frankness with empathy during this conversation?
9. Can you share an example where a team member tell you a personal problem that was affecting his/her work? How did you respond and what actions did you take to support him/her?
10. Can you describe a time when you noticed a fall in team morale? How did you handle the situation and what measures did you take to improve the workplace atmosphere?
11. Only for middle managers: can you describe an episode when you had to manage a request from your superior that you found difficult to communicate to your team? How did you balance the two positions?

The interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke thematic analysis, a systematic and flexible approach, emerged as one of the most widely used methods of analysis in qualitative research as it is accessible, adaptable and has a clear structure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is not tied to a specific style of methodology, meaning that it can be applied

to different theoretical approaches, across a range of disciplines from psychology to organizational studies.

Thematic analysis is defined by Braun and Clarke as a method for "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns, themes, within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes represent significant patterns in the data that are relevant to the research question. They are not merely summaries of the data but interpretive constructs that capture and explain larger meanings.

Thematic analysis is designed to make sense of qualitative data, particularly in contexts where patterns of meaning or key issues need to be highlighted. Its primary purpose is to provide insights into human experiences, perceptions and behaviours, making it particularly useful for exploring subjective phenomena like empathy, leadership and interpersonal relationships. Braun and Clarke's framework offers a step-by-step process that ensures transparency and rigor, helping researchers systematically analyse and interpret complex data.

Thematic analysis has been used informally in qualitative research for many years: Braun and Clarke were the first to formalize it as a method. Before their seminal paper in 2006, thematic approaches were usually encompassed in other methodologies, such as Grounded Theory or Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Grounded Theory aims to develop new theories from raw data by identifying patterns and relationships through an iterative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) investigates how people make sense of their own personal experiences, focusing on the meanings they give to the events (Smith, et. al., 2009).

As I anticipated, an important strength of Braun and Clarke's method is its flexibility. It is applicable in all theoretical contexts, from positivist to constructivist paradigms. Moreover, the method is approachable for both beginner researchers and advanced studies. In addition, it encourages transparency, reflexivity and systematic documentation, enhancing the credibility of the findings. Another advantage is its capacity to balance detailed description with interpretative depth, making it suitable for both exploratory and confirmatory research.

However, thematic analysis presents some challenges. Some critics argue that its flexible nature can result in inconsistency of application if not rigorously followed. Moreover, this method is based on researcher's interpretative skills, which represents a source of bias. Braun and Clarke themselves acknowledge these challenges, emphasizing the importance of

reflexivity and methodological transparency to address potential weaknesses (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

The six steps of thematic analysis are:

1. Familiarization with the data

   This includes immersing oneself in the data to get a better understanding of its content. This involves a close reading and rereading of the data, whether in the form of transcripts from interviews, focus groups discussions or other qualitative sources. The stage allows the researcher to become closely familiar with the details of the data and find initial themes or patterns that occur. Familiarization represents the basis of the analysis. This is the phase during which the researcher starts to get a sense of how each participant narrative connects to the wider research interest (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

2. Generating initial codes.

   Coding consists of grouping the data by meaningful units, identifying segments of text that are relevant to the research question. A code is a short label or relatively simple phrase that expresses the content of a unit of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This phase aims to divide complex data into manageable parts, allowing researchers to systematize their analysis. Codes for this study included recurring phrases, such as "understanding how employees feel", "adapting leadership style", "supporting during difficult moments" and "mediating conflicts". These codes represent the basis for identifying broader themes.

3. Searching for themes.

   The theme represents a larger sample or a bigger concept that encompasses meaningful elements in the data related to the research question. This step involves grouping codes into overarching themes (Clarke & Braun, 2013). This phase shifts from simple coding to a more interpretive understanding of the data, emphasizing the interconnections of codes and their broader implications. For instance, I categorized codes related to understanding and addressing emotional struggles under "employee support", codes focusing on conflict resolution strategies as "managing workplace disputes" theme. I grouped the codes reflecting reflections on leadership growth into "evolution of leadership styles".

4. Reviewing themes.

   The data is then reviewed to ensure that the themes are coherent and distinct from one another and representative of the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2019). During this phase, themes may be combined, split or discarded. If, for example, two themes are very closely related, they could be merged into one. This step provides analytical rigor and credibility. It helps to avoid over-interpretation or over-claiming of the data by ensuring that themes are clearly rooted in the data.

5. Defining and naming themes.

   Each theme is clearly defined, contextualized and named. The researcher defines what each theme indicates and how it relates to the focus of the study (Braun, et. al., 2015). For example, a theme such as "evolution of leadership style" could represent examples of how leaders adjusted their leadership styles based on feedback they received from employees. Defining and naming themes creates clarity for the reader and guarantees that the analysis remains focused and purposeful. This step transforms analytical insights into a format that communicates the findings effectively. For this study, the key concepts I recognized are:

   - Empathetic decision-making - how do leaders use empathy in decision-making, balancing organizational needs with the personal situation of the employee?
   - Conflict resolution - how do leaders use empathy to mediate conflicts and maintain positive relationships in the workplace?
   - Employee support – how do leaders use empathy to support employees during challenging times?
   - Evolution of leadership styles - how has leaders' leadership changed and adapted over time based on personal growth and situational demands?

6. Reporting.

   The final step involves putting the findings together into a coherent narrative that tells the story of the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The insights obtained from each theme of this analysis are detailed in paragraph *4.2. Themes emerged from the data and*

their interpretation. Direct links to existing literature, supported by illustrative quotes from the interviews and connections with previous studies.

4.2. Themes emerged from the data and their interpretation. Direct links to existing literature.

4.2.1. Empathy in decision-making

The analysis revealed empathetic decision-making as a recurring theme, illustrating how leaders are using empathy when making decisions for their organizations and employees. This approach is characterized by a keen awareness of the employees' personal situations, which leaders balance against the broader organizational needs.

For example, the Spanish agency owner (I) once cited: "*The girl (...) was always overwhelmed, sad (...) it was my thing to feel sorry for her and tell her 'Look, well.. we're going to hire you full time'*"; in another situation: "*We thought about how to not lose money, but not harm her too (...) because she also has a life, she has things like that.*", while, one restaurant director (A) stated: "*I simply put myself in the shoes of those on the other side (...) to understand others, to see with their eyes and to feel what they feel*". Another example depicts the owner of the fire prevention company (B) discussed the challenge of limiting employee vacation time during peak seasons while ensuring the decision was communicated transparently and empathetically: "*I found myself making the decision... obviously by informing them of what was expected on a contractual level, so how could I act. I specified the reason why I was forced to make this decision and then I communicated it, feeling very sorry*".

These empathetic approaches allow a leader to consider the emotional aspect of the team members' realities, and not just the practical or logical aspect, making more informed and humane decisions or addressing them in different ways.

The importance of empathy in decision making is well documented in literature. Goleman (1998) emphasizes that leaders who exhibit empathy are more capable in managing relationships and navigating complex interpersonal dynamics, which are crucial for effective decision-making. Furthermore, some scholars highlighted that empathy helps leaders anticipate the emotional responses of their teams to decisions, mitigating potential conflicts and fostering a more supportive work environment (Kellett, et. al., 2006).

The same interviewee (A), and also one of his colleagues (G) describe how empathetic framing of decisions led to team buy-in: "*This thing here (...) will surely bring us benefits later. (...) But the third time you go, the customers will recognize you*"; "*I gave them the opportunity to see it as a game, a game between us and we joked about it (...) every day with a different comment or stimulus, they had a competition (...) until they got used to it*". These illustrate how empathetic decision-making and communication can align employee goals and challenges with organizational objectives, enhancing motivation and commitment.

Research by Ashkanasy and Humphrey (2011) suggests that leaders who integrate empathy into their decision-making processes are better equipped to create a positive organizational climate, which, in turn, leads to improved employee performance and satisfaction. Similarly, George (2000) argues that emotionally intelligent leaders, who are empathetic, are more successful in managing change and fostering innovation within their organizations. Empathetic decision-making also mitigates resistance to change, as employees feel that their leaders have their best interests at heart (Batista-Taran et al., 2009)

4.2.2. Conflict resolution as an empathy-building tool

Empathy's role in conflict resolution is pivotal, as it allows leaders to mediate disputes effectively, fostering a harmonious work environment. Several interviewees highlighted how empathy helps de-escalate conflicts and facilitates constructive dialogue.

One restaurant director (G) described her approach to resolving team disputes: "*I separate them and calm them down (...) I take them out of the ears of other collaborators or customers, and I explain that (...) conflicts cannot be resolved by raising one's voice or raising one's hands (...) in these situations one must immediately intervene and calm things down*"; another restaurant director (A) reflected on his method: "*I always adopt the same method; I try to calm the bees at that moment (...) then I go to hear the two bells. (...) Trying to lighten things up in that precise moment, to calm things down, to complete the service and then maybe have a beer together*". These methods of addressing conflict reflects the use of empathy to understand the perspectives of the conflicting parties, providing a neutral space for resolution.

As proposed by Fisher and Ury (1981), the interest-based relational approach for conflict resolution, aligns with this perspective, advocating for empathy and understanding as central

components in resolving disputes. Other studies emphasize that using empathetic conflict resolution can decrease tensions in the workplace and foster a collaborative environment (Ayoko, et. al., 2003).

Empirical studies underline the effectiveness of empathy in resolving conflicts. Research found that empathetic leaders are more successful at managing conflict, leading to higher employee satisfaction and lower turnover rates (Nair, 2008). Furthermore, some scholars noted that empathy in conflict resolution improves team cohesion and reduces the likelihood of future discussions, as it creates a basis of trust and mutual respect between team members (Rispens, et. al., 2007).

4.2.3. Employee support and well-being

Providing emotional and practical support to employees during difficult times is a distinctive element of empathetic leadership. Leaders who prioritize this support promote a sense of security and belonging among their collaborators, which is essential to overall well-being and productivity.

The hotel group owner (M) explained his approach: "*I try to alleviate the difficulty and give support, emotional support (...) make people understand their own value"*. One of his restaurant directors (G) cited: "*Being a leader is also this, being a big sister, being a mother, being what is needed to be"*, and another restaurant manager (A): "*I spent a lot of time on the phone with this person and I tried to find a solution as quickly as possible for the problem itself (...) I was trying to put her at ease"*. Similarly, the fire prevention agency owner (B) narrated: "*(...) I tried to be close to her both in terms of dialogue and psychological support and also to be able to grant her all the permissions she might need. I tried in every way to help her*". These types of support align with the supportive leadership style described by House (1971), which focuses on addressing employees' needs and fostering a supportive work environment.

Other interesting examples are mentioned by one restaurant manager (G): "*We formed a group; we gritted our teeth. I motivated and showed that we can do everything anyway. This is in fact what happened. I supported the team (...) and we worked together*"; "*(...) if a worthy collaborator needs an extra day, but no one replaces him, I'll do it*". Both quotes highlight a leadership style rooted in active involvement and commitment to employee needs. The first quote emphasizes

collective effort, team spirit and hands-on support, showcasing the leader's ability to create confidence and resilience while reducing the team's psychological burden. The second quote demonstrates a personalized approach, with the leader addressing individual needs, stepping in personally to provide support, assuming additional responsibilities when necessary, and fostering fairness and motivation. Together, these actions reflect a leadership approach that prioritizes unity, respect, well-being and trust.

Perceived organizational support, which includes empathetic leadership, is linked to increased job satisfaction, higher performance, and reduced turnover intentions (Eisenberger et al., 2001). Moreover, Bakker and Demerouti (2007) in their Job Demands-Resources model, highlight that emotional support from leaders acts as a resource that can buffer the negative effects of job demands, thereby enhancing employee engagement and well-being.

The impact of empathetic support is also evident in the concept of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). Leaders who provide empathetic support create an environment where their collaborators feel safe to express concerns, take risks and innovate without fear of retribution. This psychological safety is crucial for fostering a collaborative and dynamic workplace.

4.2.4. Evolution of leadership styles

Leadership styles have evolved to be more empathic, and many leaders have expressed how they are adapting their approaches over time. With experience, many leaders have reported becoming more aware of the emotional needs of their collaborators, integrating empathy more consciously into their practices.

The Spanish agency owner reflected on his leadership evolution: "*With the experience you learn that if you have good people working, you also have to take care of their breaks, their schedules"*; also one of the restaurant managers (R) and the fire prevention company owner (B) reflected on their leadership process: "*I was much more rigid initially (...) now it's a continuous grow up (...) I tried to change my style a little, perhaps even sometimes trying to turn a blind eye and talk about it at the end of the service"*; "*(...) I would tend to make decisions that cannot always satisfy my team (...) over time I have learned a little to (...) achieve the objectives with the involvement and satisfaction of my team too*".

These changes toward a more compassionate approach to leadership correlate with the transformational leadership theory that suggests that leaders should shift their style based on the changing nature of their team (Bass, 1985).

It is interesting to highlight two statements:

- One of the restaurant managers (A) told: "*Initially (...) they criticized me for the fact that I could give too much confidence to my collaborators*";
- Othe owner of the hotel-restaurant group (M) shared: "*I saw that it didn't give important results because people then became too familiar with it (...) I had to detach a bit from what the relationship was*".

The two quotes demonstrate a nuanced evolution of leadership styles, where empathy remains central but is balanced with role clarity. In the first quote, the leader reported that he received criticism for being too friendly with his staff, revealing the thin line between approachability and authority. The second quote demonstrates how excessive familiarity led to blurred boundaries, making the leader to re-set relationship. Given this evolution, effective empathetic leadership requires building trust and support while maintaining clarity of roles and accountability.

Research by Avolio and Bass (1995) indicates that transformational leaders who demonstrate empathy and concern for their employees are more effective in fostering a positive organizational culture and achieving high levels of employee performance. Similarly, other scholars argued that empathetic leadership contributes to the development of trust and respect, which are essential for effective leadership and team cohesion (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000).

The evolution towards empathetic leadership is also supported by contemporary research on emotional intelligence, as articulated by Cherniss (2000). As the workplace becomes more diverse and complex, the ability to understand and respond to the emotional needs of employees becomes increasingly important for successful leadership.

4.3. Connections and differences across organizations

Across interviews in multiple organizational settings, the thematic analysis identifies similarities and differences in the integration of empathy into leadership behaviours. Although

empathy is widely recognized as an essential component of a good leader, its role is not always the same and can vary greatly depending on the industry, organizational culture and personal leadership style of the leader. This paragraph explores these relationships and their distinctions while providing further elaborations on how empathy informs leadership in diverse environments.

Empathy represents the foundational element in promoting trust and collaboration in team building across all organizations. Leaders consistently emphasized the importance of understanding employees' emotional states and addressing their needs to create a positive and supportive work environment. Empathy facilitates trust by connecting leaders with their employees on a personal level. As an example, the owner of the Spanish agency spoke about modifying working conditions for an employee having money problems. This action not only addressed the employee's immediate needs but also reinforced a sense of loyalty and trust within the team. These responses create a sense of mutual respect and understanding, essential for organisations that aim to achieve long-term success. Similarly, another restaurant director shared that the key to motivate a demoralized team is empathy. By working alongside the team during challenging shifts, the leader encouraged a sense of unity and shared purpose. By doing this, employee morale and engagement are improved; supportive leaders allow collaborators to feel valued and act more cohesively.

Although empathy is a common theme, its nature differ across organizations: industry, organizational size and also individual leadership style influence the expression and application of empathy. These differences reflect the fluidity of empathetic leadership and how leaders adopt empathy in their own organizational contexts.

The first difference to note is the way leaders balance their empathy with maintaining professional boundaries. As previously illustrated, one of the restaurant managers highlighted the challenges that excessive familiarity with his collaborators brought, blurring the line between roles and creating for him the necessity to realign the relationships. On the other hand, while keeping a democratic and friendly attitude, the owner of the hotel-restaurant group changed his approach with the employees when they started taking advantage of his empathy. These examples illustrate the delicate balance leaders must find between showing compassion and sustaining their authority. While empathy fosters an inclusive and supportive environment, it must be paired with clear role definitions and professional boundaries to ensure organizational effectiveness.

Empathy in leadership varies in relation to the industry context considered. Leaders in high-pressure environments, such as those concerned with hospitality and fire prevention, can experience unique challenges that necessitate an immediate and empathetic response to employee need. For example, the owner of the fire prevention shared her difficulty to limit vacation time during peak seasons while ensuring transparent and empathetic communication. In high-stakes situations, empathy is critical to maintaining employee morale and satisfaction despite the constraints imposed by industry demands.

Another differentiation is whether empathy is integrated into leadership practices proactively or reactively. Proactively empathetic leaders, such as the Spanish agency owner, consider what employees need or want and use that information to change how the organization works. In contrast, some leaders are responsive to every situation and react to issues immediately as they arise. This distinction broadens the spectrum of empathetic leadership where proactive strategies can prevent potential conflicts and promote a more resilient organizational culture, while reactive approaches are essential to address immediate concerns and crises.

The various expressions of empathetic leadership in organizations demonstrate its versatility and adaptability. Empathy is not a one-size-fits-all approach, but a dynamic value that leaders should adapt to their specific organizational contexts. This adaptability is a key strength of empathetic leadership, as it enables it to address diverse challenges and foster a supportive environment while maintaining clarity in roles and responsibilities.

The analysis also shows that strong empathetic leadership is a constantly evolving practice. Over time, leaders evolve their approaches, learning from their experiences and refining their strategies to better meet the needs of their collaborators. This evolution is essential to sustain empathy in leadership, as it ensures that leaders remain responsive to the changing dynamics of their organizations and the broader work environment.

Ultimately, the common goal across all organizations is to create a supportive and inclusive work environment where employees feel valued and understood. Empathetic leadership plays a pivotal role in achieving this goal, contributing to enhanced employee well-being, increased engagement and overall organizational success. The findings suggest that while the application of empathy may differ, its core principles of understanding, support and connection remain universal, highlighting its critical importance in contemporary leadership.

4.4. Limitations and areas for further exploration

Despite Thematic analysis is a very useful tool in qualitative research and has important strengths, one of its major disadvantages is its inherent subjectivity. The thematic analysis is based on the interpretation of participants' stories, which might introduce bias. Triangulation and reflexivity were employed to mitigate these limitations; however, complete objectivity cannot be achieved in qualitative inquiry.

Although this analysis provides rich descriptions from different organizational contexts, it is limited by a small number of respondents that might influence self-reporting biases. Furthermore, cultural and organizational differences may influence the applicability of findings to broader contexts. In the future, wider research, with a range of industries and a larger sample, could improve the generalisation of these findings.

The interviews revealed several interesting points that deserve further exploration. For example, the tension between empathy and authority among middle managers raises questions about how leaders can balance relational and task-oriented demands. Additionally, the preventive use of empathy, as described by the Spanish agency leader, suggests a proactive approach that could be studied further in larger organizational contexts.

Moreover, qualitative data is heavily based on participants giving depth and open responses. Factors such as interviewer skill, rapport and participants' comfort levels may influence the richness of the data. Future research could explore alternative qualitative methods, such as focus groups or ethnographic observations, to gain a broader range of insights.

Despite these limitations, the qualitative findings significantly contribute to understanding the importance of empathy in leadership. By capturing the nuanced experiences and perceptions of leaders and employees, this chapter provides a foundation for further exploration and practical applications in organizational development.

Conclusions

The findings of this thesis highlight the vital role empathy plays in leadership and suggests that it is not simply an optional leadership trait, but a prerequisite for effective leadership within today's organizations. Empathy is proven to be important in getting through the complexities of organizational behaviour, relationships and outcomes.

As explained in *Chapter II Research Methodology,* fundamental were the questions guiding my research: *How does empathy influence leadership effectiveness and employee satisfaction across various organizational contexts? How is empathy distributed among leaders, and how is it experienced and applied in leadership practices?*

These are the questions that formed the basis for my research on the various aspects of empathy in a leadership role and its impact on both leaders and their collaborators. Combining quantitative and qualitative analysis applied to three organizational setting that operate nowadays in Italy and Spain, the study offered a multifaceted understanding of empathy, its manifestations, perceptions and influences on organizational culture and performance.

Empathy emerged as a complex construct, combining both emotional and cognitive aspects. Empathetic leaders demonstrate a strong ability to establish trust, reach greater employee satisfaction, superior team cohesion and performance.

The quantitative analysis showed a recurrent, even not big, difference between how leaders perceive their own empathy and how it is perceived by their collaborators. Leaders scored themselves as empathetic, especially in the emotional areas such as empathy concern. Team members, on the other hand, often rated their leader lower, particularly in cognitive empathy, as evidenced by perspective-taking scores. This gap suggests that leaders either overestimate their emotional connection with others or underestimate the impression of their empathic actions to others. For instance, while leaders may feel they are compassionate and caring, employees might perceive these efforts as inconsistent or insincere if not communicated effectively. Qualitative findings from interviews supported this perspective, illustrating that a leader's empathy is effective if it adapts to the needs and contexts of the team members. In essence, it is not enough for leaders to feel empathy; they must also express it in ways that resonate with and are appreciated by their followers. Forbes, a global media company, published an article on the practical value of empathy as a leadership skill, which aligns with and reinforce the findings of this thesis. Empathy revealed to represent an essential skill for effective leadership, especially for promoting employee engagement and trust (Brower, 2021). According to the article, actionable strategies that leaders should adopt to show empathy and reduce the gap between their self-perception and employees' lived experiences are active listening, open and transparent communication and personalized support (Brower, 2021).

The tangible impacts of empathy on organizational outcomes also highlight its need. The quantitative data showed that leaders' empathy was positively associated with employee engagement, while qualitative data explained this phenomenon by highlighting how empathy influences loyalty, motivation and a sense of belonging among team members. For instance, leaders who have shown empathic concern and perspective-taking were credited with more trust. As a consequence, this research highlights that empathetic leaders are more likely to reduce burnout, retain talent and create inclusive environments by making employees feel valued and comprehended. The strategic importance of empathy is emphasized even further in an article published by *GQ Italia,* which highlights how leading with empathy cultivates innovation, inclusivity and engagement. It states that employees with leaders that are highly empathetic experience a boost in creativity as well as a greater feeling of engagement (Salsi,

2022). However, the variability in the research results suggests that the effectiveness of empathy is related to its alignment with organizational culture, team dynamics and personal employee needs.

Furthermore, an article on proactive emotional management emphasizes the importance of proactive empathy, which involves anticipating emotional problems and dealing with them before they become larger issues (Svirina, 2017). According to the article, leaders can manage emotions in advance to influence the organization's dynamics, strengthening team cohesion, avoiding conflicts and fostering trust as seen with the Spanish agency's owner.

The role of context emerged as a strong determinant of how empathy is expressed and received in leadership. Among the three organizations studied, I found noticeable differences in the industry and in the culture of the organization. In the hospitality sector, since emotional labour is required in daily routine, leaders showed higher levels of empathic concern and were more appreciated by employees. On the other hand, technical and creative industries valued more cognitive empathy, prioritizing problem-solving and strategic thinking rather than emotional engagement. This divergence challenges the idea of a universal model of empathetic leadership and highlights the importance of tailoring empathy to the cultural and operational contexts of each organization. leaders need to recognize these needs in order to successfully apply empathy in different settings.

Moreover, gender revealed to have an important role in shaping empathic leadership. In this research, female leaders scored higher on emotional empathy dimensions, such as empathic concern and personal distress, reflecting that women usually have a natural tendency in emotionally connecting with others. Male leaders, conversely, showed marginally higher levels of cognitive empathy. These results are consistent with emotional intelligence and leadership literature that indicates that, in general, women are more skilled in relational and interpersonal dimensions of leadership, and men tend to focus on the task-oriented side of the interaction. However, it is also important not to overgeneralize these trends. Qualitative data revealed that individual personality, experience and situational demands can deny stereotypical gender patterns. This emphasizes the need to examine empathy in the context of leadership in a comprehensive way that looks at several intersecting aspects. In line with these findings, SAGE Publisher, a global academic publisher, shared a video of a conference where experts, through interviews and empirical studies, discussed the ways in which gender can affect the experience and expression of empathy (in sk.sagepub.com, 2016). The video highlights how men and

women may differ in their emotional reactivity and empathic behaviours. However, it is crucial for leaders to possess both emotional and cognitive empathy, regardless of their gender, and to adapt their leadership styles to meet to the needs of their collaborators.

Another important theme that emerged from this study is the intersection of empathy and cultural intelligence. In today's increasingly globalized and multicultural work environments, leaders must be aware of different cultural aspects in order to facilitate an atmosphere of inclusion and cooperation. According to qualitative result, leaders who exhibit cultural empathy, a feeling of understanding, respect and appreciation of the emotional and cognitive frameworks of collaborators from different backgrounds, establish cohesive and effective teams. However, the ability to adapt empathic approaches to multicultural contexts can vary significantly among leaders. Additionally, the cultural context of a country itself plays a significant role in shaping the dynamics of empathy and leadership. As highlighted in one interview, a restaurant director (R) who had also worked in Sydney noted *"(...) the style is Anglo-Saxon in the restaurants I have worked in, consequently there is less feeling, less empathy, there is not this 'extra care', this taking care".* This observation highlights that cultural norms and habits can influence how empathy is expressed: Anglo-Saxon cultures, for example, perhaps focus less on emotional involvement than other cultures, such as Italy which prioritizes more the personal connection. Therefore, it is essential to incorporate cultural awareness into leadership programs, offering leaders the tools to balance empathy with cultural sensitivity and cultural norms.

Although empathy and its transformative power appear to be moderate-to-high involved in leadership practices within the three organizations examined in this study, the broader perspective seems to be different. For instance, Generali, an Italian insurance company that operates all over the world, recently expressed discontent over the stagnation of leadership evolution despite the increasing request for emotionally intelligent leaders. The article identified institutional obstacles to the adoption of empathy, including an outdated model of training and organizational cultures resistant to change (Dishman, 2025). This divergence may reflect sectoral bias or just the slow and gradual steps that some realms are making in integrating empathy as a strategic leadership tool.

Suggestions for developing empathetic skills involve formal training and programs. To bridge the empathy gap, leaders should foster self-awareness, seek constructive feedback, practice perspective-taking and active listening, may through workshops and interactive role-playing

scenarios. These exercises allow leaders to train empathetic responses to real-world situations. Mentorship and peer feedback are also important techniques to improve the use of empathy and methods such as mindfulness and reflective journaling can further increase the self-awareness of leaders and help them to manage their emotions and reactions. Companies can contribute to this by incorporating empathy courses into leadership training initiatives and create an environment that supports and rewards empathetic behaviour.

Although this thesis offers interesting insights on the impact of empathy on leadership and its spread in chosen organizational context, there is a further need for experimental research. Future studies on empathy in leadership could explore the effectiveness of different training programs in fostering empathy among leaders, considering also immersive simulations, virtual reality experiences or cross-functional team-building exercises. By identifying those strategies, future research could provide more tools and frameworks for evidence-based methods of increasing empathy in organizational settings.

Future longitudinal studies could provide interesting perspective into the changing nature of empathy in leadership positions. Tracking leaders' empathetic behaviours over long periods, and their effects on organizational results, would further reveal patterns, best practices and potential risks.

Furthermore, future research should focalise on comparative studies on industries with different national backgrounds to offer a better understanding of the commonalities and cultural aspects that influence empathy, enabling leaders to better deal with diverse work environments.

Empathy, our ability to identify with the experiences of others, is an unrivalled quality: it is not a soft skill to be relegated to the margins of leadership development; it is the very heart of what it means to lead with integrity, inspiration and influence.

Appendices

Appendix A: Empathy Questionnaire

The appendix includes the complete version of the Empathy Questionnaire administered to participants to assess their level of empathy in the context of this study. The questionnaire was designed to assess both cognitive and emotional aspects of leaders' empathy, following the framework outlined by Davis (1980) and their followers' perceptions.

The questionnaire was administered to 138 participants who were asked to respond to a series of statements. Their responses (135 resulted as valid) provided critical data for analysing how empathy levels correlate with leadership outcomes.

For detailed results and analysis of the data collected, refer to Chapter III. The full questionnaire is presented below.

Section 1: Choose a language

1. Italian or English?

   ☐ Italian

   ☐ English

Section 2: Demographic information

1. Age:

   ☐ <18 years

   ☐ 18-26 years

   ☐ 27-35 years

   ☐ 36-50 years

   ☐ 51-65 years

   ☐ > 66 years

2. Gender:

☐ M

☐ F

☐ Other

3. Country I work in: _____

4. I qualify myself as a:

☐ Leader (CEO, COO, CFO, Senior Manager, President)

☐ Middle level managers (Department Manager, Area/Division Manager, Operations Manager, Project Manager, etc.)

☐ Follower (collaborator, employee)

Section 3: Leader/Middle level manager - IRI

1. INTERPERSONAL REACTIVITY INDEX: The following statements require you to dwell on your thoughts and feelings in a number of situations. State as honestly as possible how much you feel represented by each statement on a scale 1 to 5.

    1. Fantasy

        1. I daydream and fantasize, with some regularity, about things that might happen to me.
        2. I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel.
        3. I am usually objective when I watch a movie or play, and I don't often get completely caught up in it.
        4. Becoming extremely involved in a good book or movie is somewhat rare for me.
        5. After seeing a play or movie, I have felt as though I were one of the characters.
        6. When I watch a good movie, I can very easily put myself in the place of a leading character.
        7. When I am reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me.

2. Empathic concern
    1. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.
    2. Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems.
    3. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards him.
    4. Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal.
    5. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them.
    6. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen.
    7. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.
3. Perspective taking
    1. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guy's" point of view.
    2. I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.
    3. I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.
    4. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments.
    5. I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.
    6. When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his shoes" for a while.
    7. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.
4. Personal distress
    1. In emergency situations, I feel apprehensive and ill-at-ease-
    2. I sometimes feel helpless when I am in the middle of a very emotional situation.
    3. When I see someone get hurt, I tend to remain calm.

4. Being in a tense emotional situation scares me.
5. I am usually pretty effective in dealing with emergencies.
6. I tend to lose control during emergencies.
7. When I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces.

Section 4: Leaders/middle manager at work

1. On a scale 1-5, when making decisions, how often do you consider the emotional impact on your team?
2. On a scale 1-5, how challenging do you find it to balance empathy with maintaining authority?
3. On a scale 1-5, do you consider empathy one of your key strengths as a leader?
4. The following statements require you to dwell on your behaviors in the work context. Indicate as honestly as possible how much you agree with each statement (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)
    1. I actively listen and respond to the concerns raised by my team members.
    2. I adjust my leadership style based on the emotional needs of my team.
    3. I encourage a workplace culture where empathy and understanding are valued.
    4. I am usually aware of how my decisions impact the emotions of my team members.
    5. I genuinely care about the well-being of my team members.
    6. I provide emotional support to team members during challenging times.
    7. I often try to understand things from the perspective of my team members before making decisions.
    8. I consider different viewpoints before finalizing decisions that affect the team.
    9. I adapt my thinking when I realize that a team member has a valid perspective.
    10. I feel stressed when I see that my team members are under significant pressure.
    11. I feel a strong desire to help when I see a team member struggling.

12. I manage to stay calm and collected when others around me are distressed.

5. Cross-Cultural Comparison. Indicate as honestly as possible how much you agree with each statement (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).
    1. I make an effort to understand the emotional and cultural context of my team members from diverse backgrounds.
    2. I adjust my empathetic responses based on the cultural norms of my team members.
    3. I find it important to adapt my empathy to better relate to team members from different cultural backgrounds.
6. Gender Differences. Indicate as honestly as possible how much you agree with each statement (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).
    1. I am aware that different genders may experience and express empathy differently, and I adjust my responses accordingly.
    2. I strive to ensure that my empathetic behavior is inclusive and supportive of all gender identities.
    3. I recognize and address gender-specific emotional needs within my team.
7. Additional question ONLY for Middle Level Managers. Indicate as honestly as possible how much you agree with each statement (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).
    1. I often find myself mediating conflicts by understanding both the upper management's and team members' perspectives.
    2. I use empathy as a tool to align the expectations of upper management with the needs of my team.
    3. I consciously model empathetic behavior to both my team and upper management.
8. Comments, personal opinions, experiences to tell: _____

Section 5: Follower

1. Gender of your leader:

    ☐ M

☐ F

☐ Other

2. On a scale 1 to 5, How often do you feel that your leader understands and considers your feelings?
3. On a scale, how effective do you think your current leader is in showing empathy?
4. Would you prefer your leader to demonstrate more empathy in their interactions with the team?

   ☐ Yes, I would

   ☐ No, I wouldn't

5. The following statements require you to dwell on your behaviors in the work context. Indicate as honestly as possible how much you agree with each statement (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

   1. My leader listens to and addresses the concerns I raise.
   2. My leader adapts their leadership approach to suit the emotional climate of the team.
   3. My leader promotes a culture of empathy and mutual support within the team.
   4. My leader is aware of how their actions affect my emotional state.
   5. My leader genuinely cares about my well-being.
   6. My leader offers emotional support when I am facing difficulties.
   7. My leader makes an effort to understand situations from my point of view.
   8. My leader values and considers different viewpoints when making decisions.
   9. My leader is flexible in their thinking when presented with valid arguments.
   10. My leader appears to be affected when team members are stressed.
   11. My leader shows a strong desire to help when I am struggling.
   12. My leader remains calm even when the team is under stress.

13. My leader is approachable when I need to discuss personal issues that affect my work.
14. My leader treats me fairly, considering my personal circumstances when necessary.
15. The empathy shown by my leader positively impacts my job satisfaction and productivity.

6. Cross-Cultural Comparison. Indicate as honestly as possible how much you agree with each statement (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).
    1. My leader demonstrates an understanding of how cultural differences impact the emotional dynamics within the team.
    2. My leader's empathetic behaviour is culturally sensitive and respectful.
    3. My leader's empathy is effective across a culturally diverse team.
7. Gender Differences. Indicate as honestly as possible how much you agree with each statement (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree).
    1. My leader's empathy resonates differently depending on the gender of the team member.
    2. My leader's empathy is perceived as inclusive and supportive, regardless of gender.
    3. My leader is attentive to the different emotional needs that may arise due to gender differences.
8. Comments, personal opinions, experiences to tell: _____

Appendix B: Transcriptions of Behavioural Event Interviews

In this appendix, I include the complete transcripts of the BEIs that were conducted and considered in this study. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcripted with TurboScribe. These interviews were intended to probe how participants behaved and made decisions in the context of particular events involving the use of empathy.

A BEI approach was selected as it motivates participants to provide detailed descriptions of specific events, identifying concrete skills, attitudes and motivations that are relevant for the research. Participants were asked to recall and describe particular situations in which they used empathy.

Six leaders from three organizations were interviewed.

To avoid attributing quotes and other identifiable information to specific individuals, all personal information has been removed or anonymized. These transcripts form the basis for the qualitative analysis presented in Chapter IV.

Below are the full transcripts of the interviews for reference.

Interview 1 - One of the male restaurant directors (indicated with A)

Date: September 19th, 2024

Location: The restaurant he manages

Duration: 21 minutes

Puoi descrivermi brevemente il tuo percorso professionale, come sei giunto a questa posizione, limitandoti a raccontarmi tre step più rilevanti?

A: Mi sono laureato in mediazione linguistica. Ma non ero soddisfatto. Ho iniziato a lavorare come cameriere in uno dei ristoranti appartenenti al gruppo. Qui ho conosciuto C, che diventa poi mia fidanzata e ora madre di mio figlio. Una volta iniziata la relazione ho deciso di cambiare lavoro, ci siamo divisi perché preferivamo il rapporto emotivo piuttosto che quello lavorativo. Suo padre, il titolare del gruppo torna dopo qualche anno in cerca di me perché aveva bisogno di una mano in uno degli altri ristoranti. Qui sono diventato vice responsabile. Successivamente

la famiglia in evoluzione ha deciso di comprare altre attività e una di queste è un secondo hotel nel quale è stato aperto il ristorante A.M. Mi viene chiesto subito se volevo prendermelo in carico e così ho accettato, mi sono buttato proprio senza neanche minimamente pensarci. Ora sono passati tre anni, tre anni che faccio il direttore.

Come definiresti il tuo stile di leadership all'interno del tuo dipartimento e i tuoi valori guida?

A: Come lo definirei? Mi piace molto il calcio, sono un fanatico del calcio e quindi a volte cerco di trasmettere quei valori che ho imparato giocando a calcio qua dentro, ovvero cercando di fare in modo che i ragazzi non siano egoisti tra di loro, che quando magari un compagno o un collaboratore ha bisogno, di dargli subito una mano, di coinvolgere tutti. Cerco di sentirmi parte di loro, quindi non è che se c'è da passare la scopa o da grattare per terra quando facciamo la saponata, non lo faccio perché sono il direttore. Lo faccio. E quando capita di mettermi la traversa, per mancanza di personale, o per ristorante pieno per esempio, me la metto senza nessun tipo di problema, anzi lo faccio volentieri.

Quando pensi all'empatia nel contesto lavorativo come la descriveresti?

A: Siccome sono già stato dipendente mi metto semplicemente nei panni di chi è dall'altra parte. Quindi per me rappresenta la capacità di capire gli altri, di vedere coi loro occhi e di provare ciò che provano.

Quanto è importante per te costruire e mantenere buone relazioni con il personale e come pensi che l'empatia giochi un ruolo in questo?

A: Credo che sia fondamentale perché se un mio collaboratore sta bene vuol dire che viene al lavoro e fa le sue cose fatte bene.

Hai notato cambiamenti nel modo in cui gestisci il team da quando hai iniziato?

A: Sì, molti. All'inizio, questo però non so se sia una cosa molto positiva o negativa, bisogna vederla da due punti di vista. Mi criticavano magari il fatto che potevo dare troppa confidenza ai miei collaboratori. Poi col passare del tempo mi sono reso conto che questa cosa qui, il fatto di parlare tanto con loro, mi ha aiutato invece. Se riescono a raccontarti qualcosa, qualche problema che loro hanno, tu aiutandoli a risolvere ti senti importante anche per loro. Quindi ti vedi come un punto di riferimento non solo come ruolo nel contesto lavorativo.

Mi puoi raccontare di una volta in cui un dipendente ha avuto difficoltà a gestire lo stress sul lavoro? Sei riuscito a comprendere la situazione e a sopportarlo? Se sì, come?

A: Diciamo che sono cose che succedono spesso quando magari qualcuno si arrabbia. In quel momento lì cerco di… mi è successo anche l'altro giorno con una ragazza, ormai la conosco e riesco a capire dal modo in cui cammina e da come parla che è nervosa. Quindi la guardo e le chiedo se è una cosa che si sistema subito o è una cosa che possiamo fare dopo. Se lei mi dice "no, adesso mi passa", la superiamo così; se invece è una cosa che si allunga nel tempo di cui ha bisogno di sfogarsi, allora cerco di affrontare la cosa e di andare a trovare insieme a lei la soluzione... Poi, a seconda della sua natura, e di cosa vuole lei o la prendo subito in disparte e la faccio sfogare, oppure aspetto la fine del servizio, e con calma ne parliamo, a volte può capitare anche davanti a un bicchiere di birra.

Mi puoi descrivere un episodio in cui hai dovuto gestire un conflitto tra i membri del tuo team?

A: La maggior parte dei miei collaboratori sono ragazze. E quindi questi conflitti si creano molto più spesso, è la verità. Adotto sempre lo stesso metodo, cerco in quel momento di calmare le api perché la priorità in orario di apertura è il servizio, e in un secondo momento invece vado a sentire le due campane. Se magari si tratta di una situazione puramente lavorativa, credo che la migliore cosa sia la comunicazione, faccio in modo che si parlino, quasi le obbligo a chiarire, se invece è una cosa extra lavorativa, suggerisco lo stesso, ma non lo impongo. Se le due persone hanno piacere di avere un rapporto tra di loro, è una cosa loro. Se invece non riescono proprio a chiarire, devono separare le due cose: lavoro è lavoro, la vita esterna è la vita esterna.

Io cerco di fare tutto il possibile, team building, andiamo fuori a bere, per fare in modo che tutti vadano d'accordo, se poi è una cosa che non passa…

Mi puoi parlare di una situazione in cui hai dovuto fornire un feedback negativo a un dipendente? Come hai cercato di bilanciare la franchezza con l'empatia durante questa conversazione?

A: Allora, sincero al 100%? Facendo dei corsi, chiaramente tutte le persone hanno dei lati positivi e dei lati negativi. Conoscendoli, impari in che modo devi parlare con uno, in che modo devi parlare con l'altro, in che momento devi parlare con uno, in che momento devi parlare con l'altro. Perché c'è chi preferisce davanti a una sigaretta, c'è chi preferisce sedersi qua semplicemente a lavoro, c'è chi preferisce farti una telefonata. E quindi in quel momento lì, che ne so, vado prima a elencargli i suoi lati positivi, e poi vado a correggere quella piccola mancanza

che può avere e chiudo il discorso semplicemente dicendo che una persona come quella che è potrebbe migliorare quella piccola cosa lì e essere una persona migliore a lavoro, ma anche nella vita, perché tante cose che ci sono qua e dentro ci sono anche fuori.

Quindi passi prima le parti positive per poi arrivare a quella che devi…

A: E poi torno per la positiva. Si.

Mi puoi raccontare un esempio in cui un membro del team ti ha confidato un problema personale che influenzava il suo lavoro?

A: Ho passato tanto tempo al telefono con questa persona e ho cercato di trovare una soluzione più velocemente possibile per il problema in sé... nel senso, era una situazione un po' particolare... ho cercato di metterla a suo agio, cioè tuttora cerco di metterla a suo agio.

Quindi sei andato ad attaccare direttamente il problema alla base per poi farlo risultare anche meglio al lavoro.

A: Esatto. Volevo aiutarla a trovare una soluzione a questo problema per il suo bene e per fare in modo che anche il lavoro non ne soffrisse.

Mi puoi descrivere una volta in cui hai notato un calo di morale nel tuo team? Anche complessivo o solo riferito ad una persona. Come hai affrontato la situazione e quali misure hai preso per migliorare l'atmosfera di lavoro?

A: Cercando di sdrammatizzare in quel preciso momento, di calmare gli animi, di portare il servizio a termine e poi magari facendoci una birra tutti insieme. Semplice ed efficace.

Puoi descrivere un'occasione in cui hai dovuto gestire una richiesta dal tuo superiore che hai percepito come difficile da trasmettere al tuo team? Come hai bilanciato le tue posizioni?

A: Questo ristorante qui è sempre stato in continua evoluzione, noi facciamo sia albergo che ristorante quindi è un po' un ibrido... anzi no, è un ibrido e quindi siamo costantemente sotto prova. Il nostro titolare è una persona molto ambiziosa e quindi vuole sempre qualcosa in più. Chiaramente quando si lavora tanto andare a chiedere qualcosa in più per il lavoro però non è che sia così semplice. La chiave qual è? Questa cosa che magari andiamo a fare, non lo so, mi chiedeva di portare la frutta in spiaggia agli ospiti. Questa cosa qui all'inizio doveva essere come un lavoro in più. Era un lavoro in più. Quindi una persona viene prima, la cucina ti deve trarre la frutta, bastava solo organizzarlo e il risultato però si è visto dopo. Tutti i clienti erano felici

perché avevano dato più di quello che loro avevano richiesto. Quindi ai ragazzi dico "questa cosa qui sicuramente ci porterà dei benefici dopo. A voi in questo preciso momento no. Ma la terza volta che andrete i clienti vi riconosceranno e così instaurerete un rapporto con i clienti che vi darà qualche soddisfazione. Quella mezz'ora, quei 45 minuti possono diventare anche divertenti".

Quindi penso che la chiave sia sempre a pensare alla soddisfazione che può avere il cliente, che poi porta alla nostra soddisfazione. Cerco di trasmettere questo ai miei ragazzi.

Da persona che si definisce empatica, che consiglio daresti a chi non lo è?

A: Bisogna mettersi nei panni degli altri, pensare "se succedesse a me come la prenderei?". Eh lo so, sembra molto semplice, ma non lo è.

Interview 2 - Male leader/owner of the hotel-restaurant group company (indicated with M)

Date: September 20th, 2024

Location: Office of the company

Duration: 56 minutes

Può descrivermi brevemente il suo percorso professionale e come è giunto a questa posizione, limitandosi a raccontarmi tre dei step più rilevanti?

M: Sicuramente la prima esperienza importante della mia vita è stata con l'acquisto dell'hotel N., che mi ha permesso di migliorare il mio stile di vita. Prima gestivo solo un chiosco e un carrettino dei gelati. Devo ringraziare mio padre per come ci ha fatti crescere. Insegnandoci che tutto può essere una sfida che porta al successo.

L'altro è sicuramente stato l'aspetto della ristorazione. Mio figlio aveva questa passione, abbiamo costruito dentro il nostro hotel un ristorante. e da qui abbiamo iniziato questo processo che è sfociato con l'acquisto di un secondo ristorante nel 2019, una scelta azzardata, un rischio d'impresa enorme.

La terza grossa esperienza sicuramente è, da dopo il periodo del Covid, avere la gestione di 400 risorse ad oggi. Derivata da una conoscenza che è aumentata giorno per giorno, mese per mese.

Ovviamente gestire un gruppo così grande e gestire anche la famiglia, una famiglia sicuramente che in quattro mesi estivi viene messa sotto stress in modo importante è un'altra scommessa difficile da portare avanti, da fare.

Quindi è partito da un chiosco ed è arrivato ad avere?

M: Sono partito con metà chiosco a 28 anni. Mio padre ha dato metà chiosco a me e metà a mia sorella. Da là a poco ho preso il mio primo carrettino dei gelati e adesso contiamo di avere in proprietà cinque alberghi, in proprietà quattro ristoranti e in affitto uno, un camping in affitto e la pizzeria è nostra in società. Abbiamo una residenza a Verona in società al 33%. Abbiamo altresì un capannone, un laboratorio che è un fiore all'occhiello per la ristorazione dove prepariamo tutti i semi lavorati per standardizzare in ogni nostro locale il prodotto che decidiamo, la tipologia di standard.

Come descriverebbe il suo stile di leadership? Quali sono i valori fondamentali che guidano il suo approccio?

M: Allora, l'essere leader ha una peculiarità. Intanto bisogna essere delle persone aperte. Bisogna avere un grado di empatia importante. Bisogna fare quello che fanno in pochi, essere il motorino, il trasportatore, più che il comandante. Il comandante se non c'è un giorno la barca va a fondo. Il leader, invece, trasmette i valori e le conoscenze, trasmette gli obiettivi e rende partecipe tutti alle scelte. Perciò in mancanza del leader le aziende vanno avanti lo stesso. Questa è a mio avviso la caratteristica principale.

Quindi se deve definire il suo stile di leadership?

M: Il mio stile di leadership è... sono a fianco e combatto a fianco dei miei collaboratori. Nel senso che si soffre insieme e si prendono le vittorie insieme come vittorie del gruppo e non mie.

Se deve elencarmi tre dei valori guida che segue?

M: Il leader è quello che si fa carico dei problemi, delle esigenze e dei collaboratori vicini. Per avere un valore importante ce lo insegnano anche ai corsi. Tu devi risolvere i problemi importanti che hanno i tuoi collaboratori, che siano le prime linee, che io li chiamo i direttori e chef, ma anche i più semplici commis o lavapiatti. Quindi loro cercheranno te e vedranno in te come un padre o come una persona importante e quando tu chiederai a loro qualcosa saranno disposti a venirti incontro.

Allo stesso tempo però a chi lavora con me io chiedo di mettere prima l'azienda che la propria vita.

Per lei cosa significa "empatia" in un contesto di leadership?

M: L'empatia è quell'atteggiamento che fa stare bene tutti quelli che sono vicini a te. Con chi riesce ad entrare in empatia e avere un rapporto di un certo tipo si instaura un legame importante. Queste persone poi sono pronte ad andare in guerra per te.

L'empatia è, tu che sei il vecchio o la punta di diamante di questa azienda, vivi con i collaboratori un rapporto che è parallelo e non superiore. Devi metterti a fianco e non metterti sopra. Questa è una delle regole più importanti.

Come pensa che la sua esperienza di leader sia cambiata nel tempo? Ha notato un'evoluzione nel modo in cui gestisce le relazioni con i suoi dipendenti?

M: Sì, i primi anni che gestivo l'hotel N. avevamo un rapporto ancora più intimo, nel senso che andavo a giocare a calcetto, andavo a bere due birre fuori.

Questo approccio ho visto che non ha dato dei risultati importanti perché poi le persone si sono prese una confidenza troppo grande e non si riusciva più a stabilire qual è il limite giusto per far sì che in un rapporto umano ci sia rispetto alle regole e rispetto al ruolo. Ho dovuto un po' staccare quello che era il rapporto, perché molte volte poi non si capisce qual è la linea.

E ne ha tratto beneficio?

M: Certo che sì.

Mi può raccontare di un momento in cui ha dovuto prendere una decisione difficile che ha avuto un impatto diretto sui dipendenti. Ha considerato i loro sentimenti e bisogni prima di agire? Come?

M: In generale faccio molta fatica a dover prendere delle decisioni che fanno star male la gente. Non confermare qualcuno nel mio staff è una decisione che faccio fatica a dare, dover dire a uno che il tuo contratto finisce. Ma bisogna.

Mi viene in mente lo chef che durante il periodo del covid ci ha dato una grossa mano, è un grande chef. Con lui abbiamo dovuto chiudere il contratto, perché lui ha messo prima i propri interessi rispetto ai nostri.

E quindi come si è comportato?

M: Ovviamente spero sempre di svegliarmi che la questione sia risolta finché non arrivo al punto finale che devo prendere le mie responsabilità.

Con lo chef ovviamente ho dovuto dirgli "guarda che non fai più parte dei nostri programmi".

Mi puoi descrivere un esempio in cui un dipendente ha attraversato un momento difficile? Come ha gestito lei la situazione? Quale supporto le ha offerto?

M: Tutti coloro che a mio fianco lavorano hanno dei momenti difficili. Quando succede cerco di alleviare la difficoltà e di dare un appoggio, un supporto emotivo. Cerco di far capire alle persone il proprio valore.

In contesto lavorativo può descrivere un episodio specifico in cui qualcuno ha avuto qualche problema e lei si sente di aver dato o meno supporto?

M: Assolutamente, ho avuto tante persone che hanno avuto delle fragilità mentali e sicuramente sono riuscito a risolverle grazie al mio supporto emotivo e grazie al mio far capire alle persone il proprio valore, far capire che le persone hanno dei limiti solo se si alimentano dei limiti con le paure, con le ansie.

Quest'anno abbiamo avuto una ragazza donna dei piani, che è andata in contesto con la governante. Le due non volevano più lavorare insieme. La ragazza aveva bisogno di lavorare, l'ho inserita in sala e ogni giorno che passo in sala le faccio capire il ruolo importante che sta giocando e quanto bene lo sta facendo, la faccio sentire importante, facendole dei complimenti, cercando anche di insegnarle come si fa meglio il servizio.

Valorizzare le persone intorno a te è l'obbligo del vero leader, del vero trascinatore di un'azienda.

Una cosa che ho creato, e sono orgoglioso di questo, nel nostro gruppo ho creato non una famiglia. Alcuni collaboratori per me sono diventati come dei figli o dei fratelli.

E per questo ringrazio la mia empatia, il mio farli sentire importanti, il mio trattarli come figli e non come collaboratori, anche richiamandoli ovviamente. Loro si appoggiano a me e io do loro tutta la tua conoscenza, tutta la tua esperienza, tutto me stesso.

Che consiglio darebbe a chi mira a sviluppare la propria empatia?

M: A mio avviso ci sono persone che hanno delle doti innate e delle persone che devono strutturarsi, facendosi anche aiutare da un percorso di studio.

Interview 3 - Female restaurant director's interview (indicated with G)

Date: September 20th, 2024

Location: The restaurant she manges

Duration: 58 minutes

Puoi descrivermi brevemente il tuo percorso professionale e come sei raggiunta questa posizione, limitandoti a raccontarmi tre step più rilevanti?

G: Il primo step, diciamo, è stato più un gioco, una sfida. Mi sono ribellata a sottostare alle dottrine di mia madre, che dice, ti do, mi devi dare. Lì ho detto, non mi dai più niente, faccio tutto da me. Ed è là che ho iniziato a fare dei servizi extra, a fine settimana, inizialmente come cameriera, poi come chef de rang e così via. Il fatto è che provenendo da un paese dell'est, Romania, il percorso è stato più tumultuoso, difficoltoso. Ogni azienda li è basata su quanto sei forte per sopportare il tipo di clientela, perché lì il forte prevale.

Il secondo step è stato in Italia, dove avevo 25-26 anni quasi, avendo due master, ero troppo qualificata per accedere nel mondo del lavoro e ho percepito dei pregiudizi nei miei confronti per chi non mi conosceva personalmente. Era un po' difficile sia darmi fiducia da un lato, in quanto rumena, sia essere inquadrata da quelli che me la davano perché ero troppo qualificata per un livello base come operaia. Ho avuto poi l'opportunità di lavorare in un pub, dove tre mesi sono diventata responsabile. Da lì ed è stato tutto un susseguirsi di lavori, in ambito ristorativo: una volta magari ero chef de rang, una volta ero caposala, una volta ero assistant manager e così via. Lavorando in diversi ambienti, in diverse strutture, sono riuscita a perfezionarmi in diversi tipi di servizio, riuscendo a empatizzare con diversi tipi di persone, di interlocutori, da un semplice operaio a un personaggio malfamato, a persone altolocate. Questo mi ha permesso nella mia vita di crescere a livello personale innanzitutto.

Il terzo e ultimo step, che è quello in cui ci troviamo attualmente, è iniziato 12 anni fa. Nelle Marche ho avuto l'opportunità di entrare in circuito Marriott come chef de rang.

Successivamente ho assunto il ruolo di maître e negli ultimi tre anni sono stata responsabile esecutiva.

Essendo una persona a cui piace la sfida e piace spostarsi mi sono avvicinata al mondo delle stagioni, estive e invernali che ti permettono ogni anno di cambiare una struttura, o comunque ogni anno di avere un nuovo collettivo, di avere nuovi collaboratori.

Ad oggi mi trovo qui davanti a te con l'ennesima stagione, quasi alla fine. Sono qui come manager food and beverage di una struttura a tre stelle.

Come definiresti il tuo stile di leadership all'interno del tuo dipartimento e i tuoi valori guida?

G: Rispetto per il prossimo, il primo, a prescindere del ruolo che ricopre. Di solito con me in struttura i ruoli non ci sono. In linea teorica dovrei gestire, ma io quello che cerco di fare è guidare, spero che questo arrivi ai miei collaboratori. Con me c'è una politica di porta aperte, possono venire da me con qualsiasi tipo di problema, sia professionale che personale. Provo sempre a aiutarli, a guidarli in maniera ottimale, diciamo.

Se devo nominare dei valori? Rispetto, professionalismo e educazione.

In quale stile di leadership ti identifichi di più?

G: Direi che il mio stile all'80% è democratico. Nel restante 20% penso di accogliere un po' tutti gli altri stili.

Quando pensi all'empatia nel contesto lavorativo, come la descriveresti?

G: Rappresenta un elemento che pesa tantissimo. Il rispetto denota l'empatia che c'è verso il prossimo. Se riesci a rispettare il prossimo, se riesci a mettersi sui panni, come si dice, riesci ad affrontare le situazioni in maniera diversa, riesci a capire. Specialmente nel nostro lavoro e in una struttura del genere, una struttura multiculturale, gli operatori provengono da diversi background, diversi paesi, lì sta il leader... deve riuscire ad amalgamarli, a fare gruppo, non a imponendo il rispetto, perché il rispetto non si impone, si guadagna. E si guadagna creando un gruppo, creando l'amicizia, creando lo scherzo. Devi essere severo quando devi essere severo nel vero senso della parola, ma non è utile stare dalla mattina alla sera sopra i collaboratori, stressandoli soltanto. Già il nostro lavoro è stressante di per sé, essendo a contatto con il pubblico. Già è stressante perché devi dare sempre il meglio di te per soddisfare l'ospite, per offrire un servizio in più di quello che si aspetta.

Poi ci sono magari questi momenti di stress, momenti dove io personalmente sono troppo carica di tutto, dove l'empatia un attimo passa in secondo piano. Ma sono attimi, perché fondamentalmente la mia leadership è basata sull'empatia.

Hai notato cambiamenti nel modo in cui gestisci il team da quando hai iniziato?

G: A livello personale sì, perché purtroppo ti devi adeguare a ogni team che incontri.

Ci sono persone che sono più coerenti al tuo modo di essere e di fare. Ci sono persone che la tua empatia, la tua bontà, la percepiscono come una debolezza e provano approfittarne, sia a livello professionale che personale. Diciamo che ho la fortuna di essere empatica, ma avendo abbastanza esperienza sia di vita in generale che in questo lavoro, mi rendo conto abbastanza in fretta se una persona ci marcia su.

Una volta ero più permissiva e ingenua... tutt'ora sono permissiva, ma sono anche più consapevole di quello che fanno gli altri e di cosa posso fare io.

Mi puoi raccontare di una volta in cui un dipendente ha avuto difficoltà a gestire lo stress sul lavoro? Sei riuscito a comprendere la situazione e supportarlo? Se sì, come?

G: Beh, il fatto è che la maggior parte dei nostri collaboratori sono dei ragazzi tra 18-20 anni. Ci sono capitate delle situazioni quando magari ritrovandosi in un ristorante pieno non sapevano più cosa dovevano fare e si sono ritrovati bloccati. In quel caso intervengo, prendo in mano la situazione, sistemo la situazione e poi li rimetto al loro posto. Innanzitutto li faccio affiancare così da dar loro la possibilità di imparare per un futuro come si gestiscono situazioni del genere.

Nello specifico, beh, niente, quando ho visto che c'era questo ragazzo lì impanicato, l'ho chiamato e gli ho detto "tranquillo, respira, fa un bel respiro, passami il palmare e affiancami, mi dai una mano per proseguire il servizio. Quando sei calmo e tranquillo e pensi che la situazione sia sotto controllo riprendi il tuo posto". Devi rivolgerti con tantissima calma, cercando di non mettere più ansia. Cercando di tranquillizzare il ragazzo ma allo stesso tempo di non perdere d'occhio la situazione.

Mi puoi descrivere un episodio in cui hai dovuto gestire un conflitto tra membri del tuo team? Come hai immediato risolto il problema?

G: Mi viene in mente così su due piedi quando un ragazzo diciottenne che tra l'altro è arrivato da noi come commis in giro di poco tempo ha fatto dei grandi passi, montandosi un po' la testa,

ha avuto una discussione quasi fisica con il nostro pizzaiolo, un signore di 50 anni. Tengo a precisare che il ragazzino aveva ragione. Io sono dovuta intervenire, li ho separati e li ho calmati. Al pizzaiolo ho detto di non lasciare la sua postazione e continuare a fare il suo lavoro.

Siccome il più alterato era il ragazzo, l'ho portato dietro, fuori dalle orecchie di collaboratori e clienti, e ho spiegato che nonostante avesse ragione, il suo atteggiamento lo fa passare dalla parte del torto, perché comunque è un ragazzino, comunque siamo sul posto di lavoro, e in un luogo pubblico; non si deve permettere di alzare la voce, i conflitti non si risolvono alzando la voce o alzando le mani. Sapere stare zitto al momento opportuno denota una persona intelligente. Ha capito, quello è stato l'unico episodio in cui è stato coinvolto in liti.

Questo è successo tutto nello stesso momento? Mi spiego meglio: c'era il conflitto, tu sei andata subito a mediare la situazione?

G: Sì, immediatamente, bisogna intervenire immediatamente.

E dopo il servizio non ne avete più parlato?

G: Sì, ne abbiamo parlato, però al secondo giorno per essere esatta, a mente fredda, facendo le sue valutazioni e comprendendo magari meglio le parole che io avevo detto. Alla fine il ragazzo mi ha chiesto scusa, ha chiesto scusa anche ai colleghi.

Però su queste situazioni bisogna immediatamente intervenire e calmare gli animi. Non puoi lasciare, "ne parliamo dopo", perché i "ne parliamo dopo", possono calmare le situazioni al momento ma il "dopo" può essere una tragedia.

Mi puoi parlare di una situazione in cui ho dovuto fornire un feedback negativo a un dipendente? Come hai cercato di bilanciare la franchezza con l'empatia durante questa conversazione?

G: Ci sono persone che non sono portate. In quel caso provo magari a integrarli facendoli ricoprire ruoli meno importanti senza mai farli sentire esclusi e se proprio non si trovano soluzioni, consiglio loro di cambiare lavoro. Assolutamente.

È capitato in più di un caso in questa stagione. La prima è stata una ragazza di origini siciliane che nonostante il suo impegno, nonostante la sua voglia di fare, a livello sia fisico che mentale non era in grado. Aveva ritmi molto lenti, dimenticava spesso le cose, ma non perché non lo voleva fare, non lo poteva fare. Dopo quasi un mese di tentativi, le ho dovuto dire francamente che era una bravissima persona, si vedeva l'impegno e che lo apprezzavo però purtroppo questo

lavoro non era per lei. Le ho consigliato, per il suo modo docile e dolce, di provare a lavorare con dei bambini piccoli, perché la vedevo molto bene in quella posizione. E tra l'altro poi l'ha fatto.

L'ha presa bene, inizialmente era rimasta male, però le ho fatto capire che non era un difetto. Le ho detto che non andava bene per questo lavoro, almeno per noi come struttura, ma allo stesso tempo ho decantato anche le lodi per le cose positive che mostrava, non è che avesse dei difetti, anzi aveva un sacco di pregi, però non adatti alla nostra struttura, al nostro team.

Un altro episodio, un ragazzo che era venuto da noi solo perché l'aveva mandato qualcuno. Non c'entrava niente né con il modo di essere né con il lavoro, i task in sé. A lui mi sono rivolta in maniera diversa. L'ho tenuto per la settimana di prova ma subito dopo gli ho detto francamente che non va bene per la nostra squadra. La sua risposta è stata “va bene”. Si è girato ed è andato via, senza nemmeno darmi modo di spiegarmi.

Hai invece un esempio su qualcuno che poi è rimasto a lavorare qua, che quindi è stato richiamato in qualcosa che ha sbagliato…?

G: Beh, questo è successo un po' con tutti. Allora, innanzitutto non lo faccio mai in pubblico, cioè non riprendo mai una persona in maniera pubblica. Quando vedo qualcosa che non va, lo prendo da parte a fine servizio, facciamo una riunione a due, gli spiego i miei punti di vista dove considero che ha sbagliato e quali sono le modalità per correggere quella situazione dal mio punto di vista, aspetto che mi argomenti il perché di quel comportamento, e cosi continuiamo. Fondamentale in questa situazione la comunicazione. Un leader deve sapere sempre quando intervenire. Alzare la voce? Mai. Parlo durante il servizio? Mai. Cioè puoi bloccare la persona se vedi che fa qualcosa di eclatante, ma comunque non lo riprendi in mezzo alle persone, nemmeno di fronte ai colleghi.

Mi puoi raccontare un esempio in cui un membro del team ti ha confidato un problema personale che influenzava il suo lavoro? Come hai reagito e quali azioni hai intrapreso per supportarlo?

G: Qui ne abbiamo diversi, sì. Ogni giorno qualcuno ha un problema. Che sia un problema reale o un problema immaginario, quella persona lo percepisce come un problema. Diciamo che ho imparato a non giudicare innanzitutto, perché non possiamo mai metterci… sì ci proviamo a metterci nei panni del nostro interlocutore, ma ognuno di noi reagisce in maniera diversa di fronte a determinate situazioni. Chi la prende alla leggera, chi la prende con empatia, provando magari più dell'interlocutore, perché succede anche all'incontrario.

Purtroppo abbiamo avuto due nostri collaboratori che hanno perso la mamma a distanza di un mese uno dall'altro. Lì che vuoi fare? Non sai nemmeno come comportarti. Cioè a livello professionale si va avanti, perché la persona anche se ti mette in difficoltà comunque riesci a sostituirla, a coprirla, ma a livello personale, a livello umano è difficile rapportarsi, difficile comprendere, perché non sai... Poi ognuno di loro ha reagito in maniera diversa alla perdita. Così che quello che vale con una persona non vale con quell'altra. Lì interviene l'empatia personale, lì interviene l'esperienza di vita e il rapporto che tu crei con i tuoi collaboratori.

E quindi nello specifico tu con ognuno dei due come ti sei comportata?

G: Io sono stata vicina a livello personale. Questa è la cosa più importante secondo me, hanno bisogno di una spalla solida su cui appoggiarsi. Essere leader è pure questo, essere una sorella maggiore, essere una mamma, essere quello che c'è bisogno di essere.

Se dovessi fare esempio invece dei problemi immaginari che hai accennato prima?

G: Si, tipo certificati di malattia per il mal di pancia e certificati di malattia perché si voleva andare in vacanza. Lì ho fatto capire che il comportamento non è stato gradito.

Ciò nonostante, ho dato seconde possibilità per rimediare. Un ragazzo ad esempio non l'ha più fatto e ha recuperato durante tutta la stagione impegnandosi al massimo. E invece ci sono altre persone che ne hanno approfittato. E avendo un determinato tipo di contratto non possiamo intervenire in maniera troppo aggressiva.

E quindi hai accettato la situazione?

G: Beh ho accettato a livello legale, a livello personale assolutamente no. Diciamo che pago di un po' con la stessa moneta. A livello personale. Ripeto.

Mi puoi descrivere una volta in cui hai notato un calo di morale nel tuo team o in un collaboratore? Come hai affrontato la situazione? Quali misure hai preso per migliorare l'atmosfera sul posto di lavoro?

G: Beh, c'erano giorni in cui il personale mancava, la mole di lavoro era alta e quindi aumentava lo stress, la stanchezza e il team era demoralizzato. In questo caso abbiamo fatto gruppo, abbiamo stretto i denti. Io ho motivato e ho dimostrato che comunque riusciamo a fare tutto. Questo infatti è quello che è accaduto. Ho affiancato il team, li ho affiancati e abbiamo lavorato insieme.

Quindi sei entrata tu a far parte del team?

G: Assolutamente, ma questo significa essere leader, significa anche essere un jolly in momenti di necessità. Se un collaboratore meritevole ha bisogno di un giorno in più, ma nessuno lo sostituisce, lo faccio io.

Puoi descrivermi un'occasione in cui hai dovuto gestire una richiesta dal tuo superiore che hai percepito difficile da trasmettere al tuo team? Com'hai bilanciato le tue posizioni?

G: Come esempio pratico... Non so se possa andare bene ma mi viene in mente questo. Per dare un servizio in più ai nostri ospiti la direzione generale ha deciso di offrire della frutta fresca in spiaggia. Un servizio che sapevo avrebbe pesato ad alcuni dei ragazzi, visto che si trattava di andare in spiaggia, con 27-30 gradi, in camicia e pantaloni lunghi, portando delle casse o dei vassoi pesanti durante l'orario della cena per i dipendenti. I miei collaboratori però non l'hanno percepito così, come un peso. Gli ho dato modo di vederla come un gioco, un gioco tra di noi e ci abbiamo scherzato su: "guarda oggi tu che sei più bello e tu che sei più giovane prendete due vassoi, vi fate vedere quanto siete belli e solari e date un po' di frutta ai nostri ospiti". Li alternavo ogni giorno con un commento o uno stimolo diverso, facevano una gara "chi ci va, chi non ci va", "chi dà più frutta, chi dà meno frutta" e così via, finché non hanno preso l'abitudine.

Visto che sei partita lavorando all'estero hai visto delle differenze?

G: Assolutamente sì a livello di persone, a livello di stile di vita, a livello di educazione. In Romania è ognuno per sé, il più forte prevale, non c'è collaborazione, forse se sono gruppi che lavorano tantissimi anni insieme... ma anche lì si vedono invidie, gelosie... Diciamo che la regola generale è ognuno per sé, infatti anche i ranghi a livello ristorativo sono ben definiti e non puoi andare nemmeno a portare un bicchiere d'acqua in un rango che non è tuo. In Italia, almeno per l'esperienza che ho io nel settore della ristorazione, i ruoli sono ben definiti però allo stesso tempo si intervallano, si mescolano. Sì, sì, sì, ecco, si mescolano, sono reparti fissi ma nello stesso tempo dove c'è il punto di incontro lì i ruoli non sono così ben definiti come in Romania.

Mi sembra di aver capito che tu ti reputi una persona empatica, quindi se tu devi dare un consiglio a una persona che non è empatica e vuole esserlo?

G: Eh, un bel esame di coscienza, per iniziare. Poi magari procedi a piccoli passi, ogni giorno fai qualcosa che tu reputi buono ma non per far sentire bene a te stessa perché l'empatia è come

l'altruismo. L'altruismo lo dai non perché ti senti bene, ma perché fai del bene e vuoi trasmettere del bene.

E quindi esempi pratici di questi piccoli passi?

G: Vai alla Caritas o a una tavola calda e offri un piatto di pasta a una persona che veramente ne ha bisogno, vedi una persona anziana che ha una borsa pesante, piuttosto che girarti dall'altra parte metti in mano le borse o la accompagni in macchina. vedi una ragazza o un ragazzo che piangono, non ti costa nulla chiedere “hai bisogno di aiuto?”, “ti posso aiutare?”

Interview 4 - One of the male restaurant directors (indicated with R)

Date: September 21th, 2024

Location: The restaurant he manages

Duration: 49 minutes

Puoi descrivermi brevemente il tuo percorso professionale?

R: Ero arrivato in un momento che non sapevo più cosa fare, non ero più contento del lavoro che facevo prima, prima lavoravo in una fabbrica, e ho deciso di dare una svolta. Facevo, sì, completamente un'altra cosa, facevo dei turni e quindi non era più sinceramente sostenibile. Più che altro non vedevo uno sbocco o avrei visto la mia vita completamente sempre uguale, quindi ho detto proviamo a cambiare. E da lì ho fatto diversi lavori, ho lavorato in un negozio di abbigliamento, non era molto per me, però mi piaceva il contatto con la gente. Di conseguenza ho provato un ristorante, ho trovato D., mi ha fatto innamorare bene o male di tutto questo mondo. Ovviamente all'inizio non è stato facile, si parte un po' dal basso e poi si va su. Sono stato lì un anno e mezzo e quando bene o male ho preso la mia posizione, non era comunque sufficiente per essere bene o male un professionista. I primi step sono iniziare a capire un po' come effettivamente si lavora, come si fanno le piccole cose, gestire il tuo piccolo nucleo, però poi si cerca di guardare un po' più avanti.

Mi sono reso conto che effettivamente non avevo nessuna conoscenza di una lingua straniera. Di conseguenza ho detto se si vuole essere dei professionisti bisogna cercare di scavare un po' più a fondo. Avevo una possibilità di andare a Sydney in Australia perché avevo un contatto lì che comunque lavorava in un ristorante e quindi ho preso i miei bagagli e mi sono trasferito lì.

Ho girato in diversi ristoranti, dal classico ristorante italiano che puoi trovare in un paese estero, quindi niente di particolare, se non classiche pappardelle a ragù o comunque cose abbastanza “basic”.

Ho fatto diverse cose fino ad arrivare anche a uno dei migliori ristoranti che si possono trovare in Australia. Quindi ci sono state diverse difficoltà e diverse problematiche da affrontare, ma anche molte soddisfazioni poi alla fine.

L'ultimo step è stato quando sono tornato indietro, sono tornato in Italia e ho passato diverse posizioni in diversi ristoranti, fino ad arrivare qui ad essere bene o male direttore del P. Sono qui da marzo, aprile e questa è la mia prima esperienza da manager, però comunque in tutti gli step che fai di mezzo, se non sei proprio l'ultimo runner arrivato, c'è sempre qualcuno a cui devi cercare di delegare qualcosa tutti.

Come definiresti il tuo stile di leadership all'interno del tuo dipartimento e i tuoi valori guida?

R: Allora, questa è una bella domanda perché essere un leader a volte avere il potere può portare ad abusarne, a mio avviso bisogna cercare di riuscire a essere belli bilanciati, avere il potere a volte è un po' pericoloso, ti può magari scappare un po' di mano e di conseguenza avere un effetto contrario. Cercare di riuscire effettivamente a guidare un team, bisogna cercare di prendersi cura principalmente delle persone di cui sei circondato perché se non ti prendi cura di queste persone, difficilmente riusciranno poi a seguirti e dare il 100%. Credo che la cosa principale sia riuscire a instaurare un rapporto umano principalmente. Poi dimostrare, spiegare il motivo, perché viene fatta o viene richiesta una determinata azione, perché i vetri devono essere puliti o perché il bagno deve essere a posto, è importante, non solo dare degli ordini, ma rendere partecipe delle motivazioni.

Credo che per essere un buon leader alla fine ci voglia un insieme di skills, di abilità e per essere un buon leader a volte essere rigido è quello che ti serve o essere sensibile, avere un po' un insieme nel giusto peso.

Quando pensi all'empatia nel contesto lavorativo come la descriveresti?

R: Prendersi cura e rispettare un po' le emozioni o effettivamente cercare di avvicinarmi il più possibile ai pensieri o alla persona, all'essere della persona per riuscire poi effettivamente a farci seguire. In maniera pratica... “Come stai, come è andata il tuo

giorno libero ieri?", "Cosa hai fatto di bello?", "Come ti senti oggi?", "C'è qualcosa che posso fare per aiutarti?" per esempio.

Quanto è importante per te costruire e mantenere buone relazioni con il personale? Come pensi che l'empatia giochi un ruolo in questo?

R: Credo che sia fondamentale, fondamentale anche solo andare a bere una birra fuori finito il servizio. Importante lasciarsi andare, comunicare se ci sono dei problemi.

Hai notato cambiamenti nel modo in cui gestisci il team da quando hai iniziato?

R: Sì, molti, ero molto più rigido inizialmente, molto molto più rigido. Venendo comunque da un passato di ristorazioni di certi tipi, certi livelli o comunque forse anche in un altro paese... Sì, cultura diversa.... anche questo. 10-20 anni fa comunque non c'era il prendersi... non il prendersi cura però non c'erano molti filtri come adesso effettivamente, probabilmente è cambiato... sono cambiati gli anni. Era molto diversa forse perché c'erano più persone, meno ruoli, più disponibilità di collaboratori e magari anche l'empatia non era una parola, un qualcosa che faceva parte della ristorazione. Cioè c'era lo chef o il restaurant manager... erano molto più duri, molto di più, o il titolare in sé non andava a prendersi cura effettivamente dei propri collaboratori, non c'era questo occhio di riguardo. Sì poteva piacerti il lavoro, ma non c'era nessuno che veniva a bene o male darti una pacca sulle spalle o filtrare. Non c'era un grigio, era bianco o nero a mio avviso.

Mi sono reso conto che stavo usando con i miei ragazzi, con i miei collaboratori un modo un po' più vecchio forse perché venivo anche da situazioni diverse, ristoranti un po' diversi dove effettivamente c'erano delle regole un po' più rigide. Non stavo attento a come mi rivolgevo, mi è stato fatto notare, per me non era in cattiva fede, non era abusare quel potere di cui parlavo prima. Me ne sono accorto e ora è un continuo crescendo. Ho cercato di cambiare un po' il mio stile, cercando anche magari a volte di chiudere un occhio e parlarne a fine servizio quando è un po' più calma la situazione e non c'è molta agitazione, non c'è stress.

Una volta è successo... noi abbiamo un orario di chiusura, e quando si avvicina l'ora della chiusura il ristorante si calma e i ragazzi iniziano a spegnersi. Una sera, mancavano ancora venti minuti alla chiusura, però i ragazzi erano ormai pronti per andare a casa. È arrivato un tavolo comunque bello importante, probabilmente dieci persone e ovviamente il nostro orario va rispettato. Quando viene comunicato l'arrivo del tavolo, due, tre persone in pizzeria iniziano a

andare via di testa, urlare, sbraitare che non è possibile perché loro sono effettivamente dieci ore che sono davanti ai forni e questo non è rispetto con altri ospiti all'interno della sala. Lì non ho probabilmente preso la scelta migliore. Ho dovuto un attimo cercare di tornare alla calma e cercare di spiegare, andare avanti a spiegare che comunque siamo ancora aperti, non posso rifiutare. Dilungandomi in questa spiegazione ha solo alimentato poi altre risposte. Di conseguenza a un certo punto vedo che non si tira fuori nulla di positivo da questa situazione e me ne vado via. Procediamo con la serata che ormai era verso la fine, cerco di andare effettivamente a parlare con queste persone chiedendogli di uscire un attimo e fare due parole.

Quello che dicevo prima che il parlare o a fine servizio o parlare il giorno dopo l'ho imparato in diverse situazioni. In quel momento, durante il servizio, non sono riuscito.

Mi puoi descrivere un episodio in cui hai dovuto gestire un conflitto tra i membri del tuo team?

R: Questa è una cosa che succede spesso. Ovviamente il problema è in momenti di stress, principalmente. In un momento di stress non sei lucido, perdi un po' le staffe e la tranquillità. Di conseguenza, qualsiasi cosa si ingrandisce.

Un evento in particolare con dei ragazzi al bar, c'era il capo del bar e la runner bar, sono piccolezze alla fine, sono proprio piccolezze. C'è stato un tavolo che non aveva ricevuto l'acqua o che forse l'ha ricevuta due volte, alla fine se si vanno ad analizzare sono proprio delle piccolezze, ma i ragazzi hanno iniziato a discutere. In quel momento lì bisogna essere autoritari e andare a dire ragazzi "Non mi interessa nulla quale è stato il problema, non ho bisogno di sapere, non è questo il momento per andare a parlarne e per vedere chi ha ragione o no". Quindi là sul momento sono andato bello rigido: "A me non interessa chi ha ragione e chi ha torto, andiamo avanti e portiamo a casa il servizio. Poi si va ad analizzare più tardi".

E mi puoi parlare di una situazione in cui hai dovuto fornire un feedback negativo a un dipendente?

R: C'è un modo che è un po' uno schema, un po' una tecnica diciamo. Si parte con un commento positivo, si va sul negativo e si finisce col positivo. Non è un prendere in giro la persona, cioè non vediamola come un modo sistematico per andare effettivamente a risolvere un problema, non è sempre così, però può fare pensare, no? Prima di andare solo a dire questo non va bene, questo non va bene, quest'altro non va bene, cerco effettivamente di analizzare la situazione.

Questa persona ha dei pregi, ha dei difetti, fa delle cose fatte bene, c'è magari una motivazione perché non fa una cosa fatta bene, di queste cose cerco di andare a sottolineare le cose positive.

“Stai facendo bene”, “Sei in fase di crescita”, “Hai un processo magari anche appena iniziato e si vede che hai voglia, però c'è un problemino che va sistemato, c'è un qualcosa da migliorare”, “Sono sicuro che comunque quando è sistemato questo andrai a fare un'ottima carriera, andrai a fare qualsiasi cosa”.

Perché secondo te questa tecnica è efficace?

R: Perché non va solo ad analizzare le parti negative, ma va effettivamente poi a sottolineare anche le cose positive che sta facendo. Quindi questa persona che riceve il feedback si sente sì, sotto il riflettore si sente sì, comunque analizzato gli viene detto qualcosa che non va bene, ma allo stesso tempo gli viene anche detto che sta facendo una cosa, un lavoro, un buon lavoro.

Però è anche vero che ci sono tante persone e tanti caratteri. Non si possono gestire le persone tutto nello stesso modo, questa può essere una tecnica, ma ci sono alcune persone che effettivamente hanno bisogno di “Devi fare così”, “Devi fare questo”. A mio avviso questa tecnica può essere usata con alcune persone che sono un po' più sensibili, un po' più delicate, un po' più fragili.

Ci sono altre persone che hanno un carattere forte, con cui non ha senso andare a fare giri di parole e magari perdere tempo. Con loro è meglio andare dritti, dritti per dritti.

Dipende dalla persona e dalla situazione, non può essere categorizzato tutto allo stesso modo.

Mi puoi raccontare di un esempio in cui un membro del team ha confidato un problema personale che influenzava sul lavoro, come hai reagito e quali azioni hai intrapreso per supportarlo?

R: Non un evento molto importante o comunque che è degno di nota, però siamo persone e la brutta giornata è qualcosa che ci va a colpire. Questo gruppo lo vedo un po' come una famiglia. Quando si viene a lavoro, può essere che la giornata prima fosse buona o può essere che fosse negativa. Siamo tutti affetti da qualcosa durante la giornata, quindi se una persona ha un morale un po' basso, se una persona ha un problema, sta poco bene, è normale che poi vada a contaminare un po' il resto del team.

Ecco, abbiamo avuto una persona che non stava bene di salute, mentalmente e anche fisicamente, e per far sì che questa situazione non andasse a contaminare un po' tutto il team, a

mio avviso è giusto spiegare al resto del team che questa persona non è al 100% oggi, senza andare effettivamente a spiegare nei dettagli. Cerchiamo un "extra care", cerchiamo di starle vicino, di supportarla piuttosto che portare un po' più pazienza, cerchiamo di essere un po' più elastici o malleabili insomma.

Mi puoi descrivere una volta in cui hai notato un calo di morale nel tuo team, come hai affrontato la situazione e hai cercato di migliorare l'atmosfera?

R: Cali di morale ci sono spesso, soprattutto mi viene in mente un periodo d'agosto dove si salta il giorno libero per 4 settimane. Il morale ovviamente inizia anche dopo una brutta serata. Ci sono diversi fattori che possono influenzare il morale singolare di un collaboratore o anche di tutto il team.

Trovare il problema o i vari problemi, partire insieme, cercare di essere il più d'aiuto, supportare effettivamente, non andare solo ad analizzare le cose negative. Un giorno è capitata una serata sbagliata, abbiamo analizzato qual è stato il problema, e ci siamo motivati con cose tipo "Abbiamo un gran futuro davanti insieme, cerchiamo di andare verso quella direzione". Ho cercato di pensare positivo e di farlo fare anche al team. Così si riesce ad attrarre di più dalla persona, più produttività.

Penso che sia anche importante per migliorare il morale ma non solo, ogni tanto fare qualche battuta per esempio, sdrammatizzare, portare delle vaschette di gelato durante i briefing, qualsiasi cosa, un gesto, cercare di avvicinarsi il più possibile.

Puoi descrivermi un'occasione in cui hai dovuto gestire una richiesta dal tuo superiore, che hai percepito come difficile da trasmettere al tuo team? Come hai bilanciato le due posizioni?

R: Cercare di mediare, non è sempre facile perché a volte ci sono delle situazioni in cui il team prende del tempo, ci vuole più tempo, ha altre cose da fare, quindi per quanto viene ripetuto, viene lasciato in disparte questa cosa.

Mi vengono in mente gli inventar i.Gli inventari devono essere fatti entro un tot, ma non si sa come mai poi viene sempre posticipato. Ovviamente per il titolare è una cosa importante per quantificare monetariamente, economicamente la spesa. Riuscire a mediare qui è sempre un po' difficile, devo trovare le giuste chiavi per far sì che il lavoro venga fatto velocemente, anche se ce ne sono molti altri da fare, quindi anche se lo staff comunque è "busy". Bisogna cercare di riuscire a spingere e supportare, non è sempre facile. Cerco di trovare i giusti modi, a volte sono

positivi, a volte non positivi, a volte sono un po' più carini, a volte un po' meno. Per esempio in questa occasione ho imposto che l'inventario deve essere fatto entro una data specifica, e ho detto ai miei collaboratori "Se voi non fate l'inventario entro questa data le mance vengono ritardate, fino a fine stagione, quando tutti gli inventari sono completati".

Quindi è una sorta di penalità?

R: Non lo è per forza, sta a loro. La palla viene passata a loro, questa è una cosa importante a mio avviso del managing. A volte è giusto non andare a decidere o non andare a imporre, ma cercare di mettere la situazione in mano allo staff, di andare a far decidere a loro del destino di loro stessi. È una tecnica. È un esempio.

Dove vorresti migliorare? O che difetto ti senti di avere?

R: Il fatto è che c'è tanto campo di miglioramento in qualsiasi persona. Gestire le persone è comunque una cosa molto difficile, non dico che non lo so fare, però è una cosa in cui voglio migliorare di continuo. C'è molto da lavorare sulla gestione personale.

Da 1 a 10 tu quanto ti senti empatico a livello lavorativo nei confronti dei tuoi collaboratori

R: Un bel 7.

E che suggerimento daresti a chi vuole migliorare la sua empatia?

R: Di ascoltare, di ascoltare la persona che ha davanti. Ascoltando i problemi o gli altri punti di vista si può leggermente capire di cosa hanno bisogno le persone.

Qualcos'altro da aggiungere?

R: Sì, credo che la leadership ti debba essere data. Farti seguire è una cosa che... sì, puoi dire al tuo staff o alle persone "Da oggi dovete seguire me", però purtroppo non funziona così... sennò saremmo tutti quanti i leader. Quindi devono sentirselo dentro. Loro devono considerarti un leader. Bisogna effettivamente riuscire a trasmettere questa cosa, che è una delle cose più difficili. Per esempio possono prenderti come punto di riferimento anche solo facendo vedere loro un lavoro che non vogliono o non sanno fare... andare a fargli vedere, farlo insieme, "Lo facciamo insieme", "Lo faccio io prima", "Ti faccio vedere come deve essere fatto". Cercare comunque di non sentirsi superiori agli altri, alla fine fuori dal lavoro siamo tutti persone, siamo tutti persone anche qui.

Per quanto riguarda la differenza di lavoro a Sydney e in Italia, qui è più richiesta l'empatia, c'è più...

R: Lì comunque è una cultura anglosassone ed è molto multiculturale come città, come paese, però lo stile è anglosassone nei ristoranti in cui ho lavorato, di conseguenza c'è meno feeling, meno empatia, non c'è questo "extra care", questo prendersi cura.

Interview 5 - Male leader/owner of the Spanish travel and event organization agency (indicated with I)

Date: December 19th, 2024

Location: Agency office, Granada, Spain

Duration: 44 minutes

Puedes describirme brevemente su trayectoria profesional y cómo llega a esta posición, limitándose a mencionar un máximo de tres pasos?

I: Vale, pues yo he estudiado una cosa que no tiene nada que ver: traducción e interpretación.

Al mismo tiempo trabajaba en una tienda, trabajé con un chico que repartía cosas. Y al mismo tiempo siempre he hecho cosas por mi cuenta. Dar clases de idioma. Creo que tenía 19 años cuando empecé, o 18, 19 años cuando empecé a comprar y vender cosas. O sea, a comprar bisutería y venderla a las tiendas o a la gente y esas cosas.

Y bueno, vi una cosa muy parecida a esto de lo que estamos haciendo aquí. Y lo vi cómo se hacía, pero se estaba haciendo mal, no se estaba haciendo de una manera muy eficiente y tal. Entonces como que cogimos la idea y la desarrollamos de una manera mucho mejor, más cercana a la gente para que tenga una buena experiencia. Y en verdad al principio iba a ser un "student job", como un dinerito extra para acompañar los estudios. Pero cuando terminé los estudios me di cuenta que yo no necesito trabajar de mis estudios.

Desde cuándo ocupa esta posición?

I: 2011, 2012.

Tu opinión, cuándo piensas a la palabra empatía, qué significa para ti en un contexto de leadership?

I: No sé, yo creo que es importante entender cómo se siente la gente dentro de la organización, no? Más allá de eso, intentar ayudar a algunos con algún problema personal o algún ajuste laboral que ayude a lo personal.. pero pienso que es un error. O sea, lo hago a veces con algunas personas, pero no pienso que es... bueno, pienso que es unerror.

Cómo cree que ha cambiado, si ha cambiado, tu experiencia como líder en el tiempo? Has notado una evolución?

I: Claro. Pues al principio tienes muy poca experiencia, no sabes lidiar o tratar con la gente que trabaja contigo, hay problemas de delegación, de estructura.. Yo empecé desde cero, entonces yo me acuerdo que los primeros chicos que han trabajado conmigo eran casi como socios porque compartíamos el trabajo entre los dos, aunque la empresa era mía. Después, luego estuvimos con la tercera persona, un chico de prácticas, que después empezó a trabajar con nosotros durante más de tres años, y bueno, obviamente se cometieron muchos errores: mal aprovechar su talento, gestionar mal su tiempo.. lo típico de una startup, por decirlo de alguna manera, de una empresa que acaba de crecer, con mucho trabajo, y pocas personas: mucha carga de trabajo, la gente se cansa, y durante muchos años pues cometíamos ese error de que la gente cuando entraba a trabajar aquí se cansaba mucho, porque los horarios a lo mejor no eran los mejores y tal, y no pensábamos en eso. Entonces con la experiencia aprendes que si tú tienes gente buena trabajando, también hay que cuidar de sus descansos, de sus horarios, y en el momento en el que empiezas a descansar, a dar a la gente unas condiciones más, desconectar, tener vida social, pues la gente empieza también a rendir más, incluido nosotros.

Puedes hablarme de algún momento en el que tuviste que tomar una decisión difícil que afectó directamente a sus empleados? Considerè sus sentimientos y necesidades antes de actuar? Como?

I: Sí, bueno, lo más parecido podría ser en el COVID, que se venían unos meses en los que no sabíamos qué iba a pasar, cuánto tiempo íbamos a estar sin ingresar dinero. Había, creo que había tres personas trabajando con nosotros.

Eramos cinco fijos, más los chicos de los fines de semana, que no son fijos, entonces con esos no hubo ningún problema, porque ellos trabajan, cobran cuando hay trabajo, cuando no hay trabajo, pues no hay nada.

Pero los chicos que estaban fijos, pues, básicamente, para ser honestos, teníamos una persona que llevaba cinco meses, otra persona que llevaba cuatro meses, y una persona que llevaba tres

años. Entonces, de tres años le dimos la opción de que si la ponemos en un régimen del gobierno, que la empresa tiene que estar pagando por ella una cuota para que ella reciba un sueldo del gobierno, porque, bueno, es una chica que considerábamos ya como familia, estaba con nosotros durante tres años, ha hecho mucho por la empresa. Entonces, obviamente, en ese momento sí hemos pensado en cómo hacer para no perder dinero, pero no perjudicarla ella también, porque ella también tiene una vida, tiene cosas tal. Bueno, al final ella se fue por voluntad propia, porque dijo que quiere seguir estudiando y que aprovecha este parón del COVID para seguir con su carrera, así que no fue ningún problema. Y las demás chicas, pues, es verdad que no hemos tenido mucha consideración ni empatía ninguna, porque llevaban cuatro o cinco meses. Simplemente les dijimos que ya no van a seguir con nosotros, porque, pues, estamos cerrados.

Has hablado de familia, es importante el concepto de familia en el ambiente del trabajo?

I: Bueno, depende de la gente. O sea, hay personas que sí dejan un impacto y yo los considero como parte de la familia de la oficina, aunque nunca los vamos a volver a ver quizás porque son de otro país. Pero sí es importante que la gente se sienta también parte de... Si tú has trabajado en un sitio, te ha gustado, te has sentido cómodo, pues... Sí, yo creo que para mí es importante que la gente se siente en un ámbito de trabajo familiar.

Puedes describirme un ejemplo en el que un empleado, a través de un momento personal difícil, cómo manejó la situación y qué apoyo le ofreció?

I: Sí, sí. Una vez, dos veces, varias veces diría yo. La vez más difícil ha sido una chica que... Básicamente la hemos contratado para medio tiempo, porque es lo que estábamos buscando, una persona que se ocupe de unas tareas, pero que son tres, cuatro horas al día. Ella lo aceptó porque estaba buscando un poco desesperadamente trabajo. Y lo aceptó, se mudó aquí. Después de unas semanas me doy cuenta de que tiene que pagar un piso sola, que tiene un novio que no hace nada y que vive con ella y ella lo tiene que mantener. Tiene un perro que siempre está enfermo que tiene que pagarle el médico. Y la chica pues estaba siempre agobiada, triste, porque claro, con un trabajo de cuatro horas al día, tú no pagas todas estas cosas. Entonces sí que fue una cosa mía de darme pena y decirle “mira, pues te vamos a contratar full time y vamos a ver esas otras cuatro horas, qué puedes hacer, vamos a crear otras cosas, quizás un nuevo proyecto y cosas así”.

Al final fue un errorporque esa chica no trabajó bien, no ha hecho nada bien y ha hecho muchas cosas mal para la empresa. Incluso cuando se ha ido hizo cosas muy malas. Entonces pues

resultó ser un error intentar. Pero he intentado porque yo lo quería intentar, me parecia al empezar una buena cosa. Ella no me preguntó nada.

Puedes contarme una situación en la que un miembro de su equipo no cumplía con las expectativas como afrontó la conversación?

I: Por ejemplo, con esta chica también. Básicamente me senté con ella, le he dicho algo como: "oye, hemos acordado unas cosas, que tú te ibas a ocupar de unas cosas, de un trabajo y lo que estoy viendo es que estamos pagando un sueldo más pero se está haciendo el mismo trabajo contigo que sin ti. Entonces tú estás aportando cero valor. Tu sueldo no cae del cielo, o sea, el sueldo se genera con trabajo". Y ella dijo que lo entendía.

Después de seis meses creo que tuvimos esta conversación. Entonces yo le dije "bueno, pues te damos un mes de oportunidad pero volvemos a las condiciones iniciales, tú tienes cuatro horas al día porque no vamos a hacer una prueba de un mes más de ocho horas. Vamos a ver lo que sacas de cuatro horas primero y ya después veremos, digo, si en un mes mejora la cosa pues te volvemos a hacer ocho horas y si no mejora la cosa te tendrás que ir". Muy directo. Sí.

Puedes escribirme el momento en el que reconoció la necesidad de adaptar su estilo de leadership a las necesidades de un equipo, de un empleado.

I: Yo recuerdo varias veces.. Durante los años la estructura de trabajo o la estructura de... no voy a decir jerarquía porque no sería una jerarquía realmente. Sería como un reparto de tareas y de estructura de empresa. Bueno, hemos encontrado a una persona que trabajaba fuera de la oficina, una persona que trabajaba a la noche, una y tambièn de día. La queríamos contratar pero no podía trabajar estos días pero estos sí, pero nosotros sí la queríamos tener en el equipo. Pues hemos hecho cambios significativos para adaptarlos a una persona. Sí, lo hemos hecho varias veces.

Vale. Y si piensas a la gente que trabaja contigo, nosotros o los otros interns o los chicos delante, tiene con todo el mismo estilo de leadership?

I: No. Pues hay gente más sensible, hay gente más... "grounded", o sea, hay gente que tiene más pies en el suelo, en el que se le puede hablar más directo y normal. Hay gente que está todavía viviendo en el mundo de los hippies, entonces pues hay que tratarlos acordemente.

Hablo, en general, la gente en prácticas, no? La gente que viene para hacer sus prácticas, pues se ve desde el principio: hay personas que van a ser más aptos o más disponibles para hacer

cosas, más "engaged", más dispuestos. Y hay personas que, como los llamamos nosotros, echan las horas. Que vienen, esperan las 2 y se van y ya está. Obviamente, si fuera un trabajador nuestro no duraría aquí más de un mes. Si hace eso. Pero como son de prácticas, terminan su contrato de prácticas y ya está.

También es diferente una persona que ya ha trabajado en el pasado. Hay gente que lleva trabajando desde los 16 años, gente que lleva trabajando desde antes quizás en un negocio familiar, que con 14 años ya iba al supermercado, lo que sea, con su padre a vender y a comprar. Entonces, normalmente ese tipo de gente suele tener los pies más sobre el suelo, tiene una realidad del mundo más realista. Y entonces con esa gente se puede tener conversaciones y tratos más reales, más directos, más tal.

Y hay gente que vive en TikTok, entonces pues... intento no tratar con ellos directamente porque espero que su contrato termine. O sea, yo intento hacer siempre, al principio, dar el beneficio de la luz, el "benefit of the doubts" a todos. Pero ya con mi edad y con toda la exuberancia que tengo, con los negocios que tengo, con todo el personal que tengo que gestionar, no tengo ni tiempo, ni paciencia, ni posibilidad de esta dando segunda oportunidad. O sea, una, y si ya no, pues paso de tema. No vale la pena.

No, porque yo al final, entre esta oficina y las otras cosas, contando a vosotros, que creo que hay 21. Si son 21 en la oficina. 10 más 31, 21... mas o menos 50 personas entre todas las actividades que tengo. Sí, no. No puedo estar ahí haciendo babysitting a todo el mundo.

Ultima pregunta, algún episodio, comentario, nota adicional que consideras relevante para mi investigación sobre la importancia de la empatía en la leadership?

I: Sí, hay algo. Estoy pensando. Yo pienso que depende mucho de las personas. Yo siempre lo he pensado, pero ahora lo pienso más. Con los años lo pienso más todavía. Que depende mucho de las personas. Hay personas que merecen la pena tener empatía y como que luchan para que se queden o esforzarse para que se sientan cómodos, contentos y que se queden en una empresa. Y hay personas que no, que sería al revés. Es un error tenerles empatía, tenerles consideración. Hacen su trabajo y ya está.

Básicamente tu empatía cambia al cambiar de las personas.

I: Sí, correcto. Porque al final todos conocemos que cuando vamos al ayuntamiento, a algún departamento público a pedir un documento, están trabajando 25 personas, 7 no están, 5 están

enfermos, quedan 15 ahí en la oficina, 13 te atienden mal porque solo están... y aprovechan cualquier oportunidad para irse, para no trabajar, para trabajar el mínimo posible. Y hay 2 que siempre atienden a la gente bien, que siempre están ahí con una sonrisa, que siempre están ahí y cobran lo mismo que los demás. Y eso existe en todos los departamentos públicos, privados, grandes empresas, pequeñas empresas.

Bueno, en las pequeñas empresas ese tipo de gente que no quiere trabajar dura muy poco, porque se ve rápido y cuando no trabajan no se vende y no hay resultados. Entonces se va rápido. Pero no puedes tener el mismo trato con una persona que lo da todo, que con una persona que cuenta los minutos, que está ahí y no quiere estar ahí, no quiere trabajar, una tarea que a lo mejor toma 10 minutos la hace en 4 para que le pase el tiempo más rápido.

Hay personas que lo merecen y eso es como todo en la vida, no? Y hay personas que se aprovechan de ella para abusar.

Interview 6 - Female leader/owner of the fire prevention company (indicated with B)

Date: January 3rd, 2025

Location: Remotely, via video call

Duration: 32 minutes

Come descriveresti brevemente il tuo percorso professionale in tre step più rilevanti?

B: Diciamo che la mia carriera professionale è iniziata in maniera molto impattante nel momento in cui è mancato mio papà, per cui da un giorno all'altro mi sono trovata a dirigere l'azienda, che all'epoca era un'azienda piccola, parliamo di 30 anni fa, ma pur sempre un'azienda con dipendenti, con tutte le problematiche relativi a contratti di appalto, mi sono trovata improvvisamente a fare l'imprenditore ed ero giovane, avevo 26 anni. Quindi diciamo che è stata una cosa improvvisa, da autodidatta perché comunque considera che 30 anni fa non c'erano le opportunità di formazione che ci sono oggi e anche molto impattante dal punto di vista dell'approccio donna imprenditrice nei confronti dell'ambiente che era maschile e in cui la donna comunque 30 anni fa faceva fatica ad affermarsi come imprenditore donna perché solitamente a quell'epoca l'imprenditore veniva considerato l'uomo purtroppo. Quindi queste sono un po' le caratteristiche che mi sento di lanciare.

Come descriveresti il tuo stile di leadership e quali sono i valori fondamentali che ti guidano?

B: La mia leadership non è sempre facile perché tendenzialmente sono una persona impulsiva e quindi tenderei a prendere decisioni che non sempre possono accontentare il mio team e che nel tempo ho imparato un po' a modulare proprio per cercare di comprendere maggiormente quelle che sono anche le esigenze del mio team e quindi trovare il modo di raggiungere gli obiettivi con il coinvolgimento e con la soddisfazione anche da parte del mio team.

Quindi, come pensi che sia cambiata la tua esperienza di leader nel tempo?

B: Inizialmente era più di tipo istintivo senza considerare l'importanza e il coinvolgimento del team, questo nel passato. Poi ho lavorato su me stessa anche con dei coach all'esterno che mi hanno fatto capire l'importanza e vedere quanto poi la soddisfazione del team portasse maggiore risultato per tutta l'azienda. Quindi si, la mia leadership si è modificata negli anni.

E quando pensi alla parola empatia, cosa significa per te in un contesto di leadership? Come si traduce nel tuo ruolo?

B: È molto importante. Il fatto di cercare di capire e comprendere i collaboratori anche dal loro aspetto umano, dal loro aspetto di vita quotidiana e anche lavorativa è molto importante. Quindi da imprenditore l'empatia ritengo sia uno degli aspetti fondamentali.

Ne parlavo proprio oggi con un altro imprenditore di questo aspetto, molto importante. È una cosa molto importante. Ma lui non la pensava come me. Gli ho suggerito di essere un po' più empatico. Io mi sono resa conto che in un ambiente, in un ruolo da imprenditore, se sei, se riesci ad essere empatico, riesci anche ad avere più stima dal tuo team. Certo. Proprio perché gli dai attenzione.

E quindi anche la tua empatia si è un po' più sviluppata negli anni?

B: Sì, certo. Cambiando il ruolo di leader è cambiata anche la visione dell'empatia.

Mi puoi raccontare di un momento in cui hai dovuto prendere una decisione difficile che ha avuto un impatto diretto sui dipendenti. Hai considerato i loro sentimenti, i loro bisogni prima di agire? Se sì come?

B: Allora, ti racconto di un episodio in particolare dove non ho tenuto conto dei loro bisogni, nel senso che nel passato le ferie nel mese di luglio venivano gestite un po' in base alle esigenze di ogni persona. Ok. Ma queste esigenze personali cozzavano contro gli interessi dell'azienda

perché comunque il mese di luglio per noi è un mese lavorativo molto importante. Mi sono trovata a prendere la decisione ovviamente informandoli di cosa era previsto a livello contrattuale, quindi come potevo io agire. Ho specificato il motivo per cui mi trovavo costretta a prendere questa decisione e quindi l'ho comunicata, molto dispiaciuta. Quindi impostando una regola sulle ferie che dovevano essere limitate a 5 giorni lavorativi per ciascuno e non più a 2 settimane, 10 giorni lavorativi per i beni dell'azienda.

Quindi ho dato questa comunicazione ai miei dipendenti, ovviamente chi era abituato ad avere due settimane di ferie nel periodo di luglio ha reagito in maniera, come posso dire, arrabbiata perché comunque gli veniva leso qualcosa che faceva parte ormai dell'ordinario e ovviamente io non ho potuto tener conto dei loro bisogni in quel momento perché l'obiettivo era il bene dell'azienda in primis e perché poi l'azienda stava crescendo come ampiezza, come personale, quindi non avrei più potuto mantenere un beneficio per tutte queste persone perché altrimenti avrei dovuto chiudere l'azienda. Quindi non ho tenuto conto delle esigenze ma ho dettato una regola. Ho organizzato un incontro, una riunione dove ho specificato il motivo per cui mi trovavo costretta a prendere questa decisione e quindi l'ho comunicata molto dispiaciuta: “Da ora in poi la regola è questa” e quindi hanno dovuto accettare.

Mi puoi descrivere un esempio in cui un dipendente ha attraversato un momento personale difficile? Come hai gestito la situazione e quale supporto gli hai offerto?

B: Guarda, ho avuto una dipendente che ha avuto un periodo molto difficile perché aveva il marito ammalato, un malato terminale e quindi ho cercato di esserle vicino sia a livello di dialogo, sia a livello di supporto psicologico e anche di poterle concedere tutti i permessi di cui poteva avere bisogno. Ho cercato in tutti i modi di aiutarla per superare questo momento molto difficile purtroppo. Ho cercato veramente in tutti i modi e questa persona mi ringrazia sempre ovviamente perché è stata un po' la sua ancora di salvezza in quel momento e per lei venire a lavorare era anche ed è ancora un ancora di salvezza un momento in cui può uscire dallo stato in cui viveva soprattutto nel passato quando c'era questa malattia piuttosto triste di suo marito.

Quindi veramente mi sento in quel caso di aver fatto una grande azione umana che andava molto al di là dell'essere imprenditori.

La decisione delle ferie era di molti anni fa, in un periodo in cui pensavo prima al bene dell’azienda senza considerare i dipendenti. Da allora come ti dicevo prima anch'io ho modificato il mio approccio lavorativo nei loro confronti. Ovviamente il caso della malattia è un

esempio specifico che va aldilà. Ma in linea generale oggi, rispetto ad anni fa, la mia considerazione e quindi il modo in cui mi rivolgo sono cambiati.

Ma ti ripeto una volta non c'era neanche la possibilità di corsi di formazione per migliorare, di avere dei coach in azienda che ti facevano anche valutare il tuo atteggiamento da imprenditore.

Una volta un imprenditore nasceva e si costruiva così com'era con il proprio carattere, forse nelle grandi aziende c'era già ma nelle aziende piccole uno cresceva da autodidatta. Poi negli anni io ho sentito anche l'esigenza di crescere e di formarmi come imprenditore quindi sono andata alla ricerca di corsi di formazione e di coach che potessero aiutare sia me, il rapporto con il mio socio e il rapporto con i miei dipendenti.

Oggi ci sono diverse opportunità, una volta non c'erano, non esistevano queste opportunità.

Mi puoi raccontare di una situazione in cui un membro del tuo team non era all'altezza delle tue aspettative? Come hai affrontato la conversazione? L'empatia ha influenzato il tuo approccio?

B: sì, ho avuto un caso in cui una persona non era all'altezza, o meglio, diciamo che ha avuto un periodo in cui non aveva più l'entusiasmo nel far parte del team e quindi questo faceva sì che si notasse il suo atteggiamento negativo. Può essere un esempio di questo tipo? Ho cercato più volte di dialogare con questa persona e di capire perché non avesse più l'entusiasmo nel lavoro che poi si rifletteva su errori, su mancanze, quindi comunque questo suo non più coinvolgimento portava anche dei danni a livello lavorativo. Però il mio approccio era più che altro di capire cosa fosse cambiato in questa persona dal punto di vista dell'atteggiamento lavorativo, quindi sì, ho provato a dialogare più volte per capire cosa potesse girargli in testa. Ho provato anche perché per me le risorse se valgono vale sempre la pena di tenerle in azienda, nel senso che poi sulle risorse investi, informazione, insegni molto. Quindi comunque quando una persona, anche quando faccio un colloquio con una persona, un candidato nuovo, punto sempre sul fatto che per noi una risorsa è un investimento e quindi l'obiettivo alla fine è che chi entra in azienda con noi rimanga. Con questa persona pero non ci sono riuscita: ha dato le dimissioni.

Mi puoi descrivere un momento in cui hai riconosciuto la necessità di adattare il tuo stile di leadership alle esigenze di un team o di un dipendente?

B: Sì, sono stata più comprensiva con quella persona che aveva il marito che stava male, quindi da un ruolo solo di leadership ho abbassato molto il livello di rigidità per essere più

comprensiva nei suoi confronti. Anche se nel frattempo ero già diventata meno rigida, rispetto ad anni prima, meno autoritaria nel prendere le mie decisioni, però in quel momento sono stata ancora di più comprensiva ed empatica proprio per la situazione che questa persona stava vivendo.

Secondo te bisogna un attimo adattare la leadership in base alla persona, all'evento che ti trovi davanti?

B: Sì, è esatto. Nella mia azienda con 16 persone è più semplice riuscire a farlo. Nelle grandi aziende e penso che sia più complesso tutto questo.

Hai qualcosa da aggiungere che possa essere rilevante per questa ricerca, quindi qualche episodio che ti viene in mente un po' più particolare, qualche commento, qualche tua opinione?

B: L'empatia è fondamentale, è un valore fondamentale per l'imprenditore o per il leader, a beneficio dell'azienda stessa, a beneficio di tutti. Nel senso che ci guadagna l'azienda verso i clienti e ci guadagna anche la sintonia, l'atmosfera che si respira all'interno dell'azienda, perché per me è un valore fondamentale che i collaboratori vivano con clima sereno l'ambiente di lavoro. L'empatia è un valore essenziale.

Adesso mi viene in mente un'altra domanda che è specifica per tua esperienza. Quando non eri leader tu, ma lo era tuo padre, com'era l'empatia in quel contesto? Era diversa?

B: Era un valore che secondo me non se ne conosceva neanche l'esistenza. Era un'azienda piccola, però era un valore che non rientrava. Mio papà era soprattutto artigiano, era lui che lavorava fianco a fianco con i suoi tecnici in officina e portava avanti il lavoro. Mio papà, senza saperlo perché questi valori non se ne parlavano, a suo modo era empatico. Allo stesso tempo, quando doveva essere leader perché qualcosa non andava, si incavolava. Secondo me lo era in alcuni momenti per i buoni rapporti, però quando le cose non andavano bene loro ovviamente tiravano le redini dell'azienda. Però erano valori che non venivano considerati.

Sempre la stessa azienda ma cresciuta nel tempo. Leader diversi. Anni diversi. Cosa è cambiato realmente?

B: Dove una volta il valore del capitale umano non veniva preso in considerazione quanto oggi viene preso in considerazione. Il mondo del lavoro è completamente cambiato. Una volta tu dovevi lavorare, punto. Oggi invece viene prestato molta attenzione il capitale umano e quindi con tutte le sfaccettature del caso.

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