

THE HEROIC–DIFFUSE LEADERSHIP PARADOX: VERTICAL TRUST AND HORIZONTAL COLLABORATION IN A ROMANIAN RETAIL ORGANIZATION

MOGOȘ NICOLAE

FOUNDER AND MANAGING PARTNER CAN DO NETWORK BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

e-mail: nicolae.mogos@gmail.com

Summary

This paper investigates the tension between two contrasting organizational leadership paradigms: heroic leadership, centred on the vertical relationship with the hierarchical superior, and diffuse leadership, understood as a distributed process among team members. The analysis draws on an engagement survey administered to 99 employees of a multi-location retail organization in Romania between 9–29 March 2020, a window overlapping the WHO declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic (11 March). Two composite indices were constructed from 17 questionnaire items with excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$ for the heroic index; $\alpha = 0.89$ for the diffuse index). Results reveal a significant asymmetry between the two dimensions ($M_{\text{heroic}} = 4.32$; $M_{\text{diffuse}} = 3.96$; $t(95) = 7.50$; $p < 0.001$; $d = 0.77$), with 75 of 96 respondents scoring higher on the heroic index - confirming a pattern of strong vertical trust alongside more cautiously evaluated horizontal collaboration. Multiple regression analyses show that when both predictors are entered simultaneously, only the diffuse leadership index retains a significant unique association with employee engagement ($B = 0.61$; $\beta = 0.64$; $p < 0.001$) and overall satisfaction ($B = 0.84$; $\beta = 0.39$; $p = 0.021$). Sub-dimension decomposition identifies peer cohesion and voice - understood as meaningful participation in decision-making - as the predictors carrying the most specific explanatory weight. An exploratory pre-/post-state of emergency comparison, subject to explicit methodological caveats given the small post sub-sample ($n = 23$) and the absence of statistical significance, suggests a descriptive trend compatible with a centralisation of perception toward senior management under conditions of acute uncertainty.

Key words: heroic leadership, diffuse leadership, distributed leadership, employee engagement, organizational voice, team cohesion, retail Romania.

1. Introduction

The question of the source of organizational leadership effectiveness has traversed the specialist literature for over a century. The classical paradigm, anchored in the work of Carlyle (1841/1907) and later formalized through Bass's (1985) transactional and transformational models, attributes organizational effectiveness to the characteristics and behaviours of the individual leader - a perspective we will refer to here, following Fletcher (2004) and Crevani et al. (2010), as heroic leadership. The alternative paradigm, developed from the 2000s onward, proposes leadership as a distributed, plural or diffuse process that emerges from horizontal interactions among team members and cannot be reduced to formal leadership roles (Gronn, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Spillane, 2006). The two paradigms are not theoretically incompatible; however, empirical evidence and recent meta-analyses on shared leadership suggest that they can coexist and contribute differently to team outcomes and collective emergent states (Denis et al., 2012; D'Innocenzo et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2020).

The present study departs from a surprising empirical observation identified in an engagement survey administered in March 2020 at a multi-location retail company in Romania: employees report very high levels of trust and satisfaction in their relationship with their direct hierarchical superior (mean 4.6 on a 1–5 scale), yet evaluate the functioning of horizontal processes - cross-departmental collaboration, colleague motivation, lateral communication - significantly more cautiously (means ranging between 3.3 and 3.9). This asymmetry raises a question that is relevant both theoretically and practically: to what extent can a strong vertical relationship between subordinate and manager compensate for - or, conversely, mask - a deficit in diffuse leadership processes distributed laterally across the organization?

The answer carries direct implications for the interpretation of engagement indicators frequently used in Human Resources practice. If individual engagement is driven predominantly by the heroic-vertical relationship, it may persist even in the absence of robust collective processes, yet

remains vulnerable to the departure of the manager in question. If, conversely, engagement derives from diffuse processes - the sense of team belonging, voice, and collaboration - then priority investment should be directed toward developing collective leadership capabilities, not solely toward individual management training. The specific character of commercial and sales activities in Romania remains relevant to understanding the challenges of attracting, engaging and retaining personnel, given that prior research has shown that young economics graduates do not necessarily perceive the sales field negatively, yet do not frequently choose it as a first career option (Diaconescu, 2019). This ambivalence toward a sales career underscores the importance of internal mechanisms of engagement, managerial support and organisational cohesion within retail companies. In a similar vein, recent literature in the sales domain shows that work attractiveness is influenced by intrinsic and social motivational factors, as well as by employees' capacity to adapt to changing digital and relational contexts (Țuclea et al., 2025a). The data used in this study carry a particular feature that allows for the formulation of an additional, complementary question. The 99 questionnaires were administered between 9 and 29 March 2020, a period overlapping both the World Health Organization declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic (11 March) and the institution of the state of emergency in Romania (16 March). The dataset therefore constitutes a quasi-natural experiment permitting the exploratory investigation - given the modest size of the post-state-of-emergency sub-sample ($n = 23$) - of the impact of a major external shock on the balance between the two forms of perceived leadership.

The paper pursues three objectives. First, it operationalizes the heroic/diffuse distinction using a standard engagement measurement instrument, constructing two composite indices with validated reliability. Second, it tests the asymmetry between the two dimensions and their differentiated relationship with employee engagement, satisfaction and NPS. Third, it speculatively explores - with explicit methodological caveats - the shift in pattern occurring at the threshold of the state of emergency in March 2020.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Heroic Leadership: The Leader-Centric Tradition

The concept of heroic leadership has its origins in Carlyle's (1841/1907) "great man theory" and is sociologically consolidated by Weber (1922/1968) through the notion of charismatic authority. In contemporary organisational psychology, the heroic line is most visibly represented by transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006), which identifies four components - idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration - all centred on the leader as the primary source of influence over subordinates. Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) model likewise maintains the dyadic framework, although it shifts the emphasis from the leader's characteristics to the quality of the specific vertical relationship.

Common to these approaches is the presupposition that leadership is localised - residing in a person, a formal role, or, in relational versions, in a superior-subordinate dyadic relationship. Organisational effectiveness is consequently aggregated from the effectiveness of each such individual localisation. Recent critiques highlight that this perspective over-individualises a collective phenomenon (Crevani et al., 2010), neglects team members' contributions to the leading process, and underestimates the costs of organisational dependence on charismatic figures (Collinson & Tourish, 2015).

2.2 Diffuse Leadership: The Paradigm of Distributed Processes

Alternative conceptualisations of leadership as a distributed process have emerged in various forms and under various labels - distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006), shared leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003), collective leadership (Denis et al., 2012), relational leadership - all sharing, however, an explicit critique of the heroic vision. For the conceptual rigour

of the present paper, we use the term "diffuse" (in the sense employed by Fletcher, 2004, who speaks of "post-heroic leadership") to designate the ensemble of processes through which the leadership function is distributed among multiple actors, regardless of their formal hierarchical position.

Operational markers of diffuse leadership, which the literature frequently converts into questionnaire items (Carson et al., 2007; Hoch, 2013), include: (a) team cohesion and mutual trust among colleagues; (b) the quality of horizontal and cross-departmental communication; (c) voice - the employee's ability to express ideas and participate in decision-making; and (d) the collective sense of belonging. Unlike heroic markers, which centre on the relationship with an identifiable manager, diffuse markers describe the quality of the relational fabric from which the work collective is constructed.

Empirical evidence supports the finding that diffuse leadership is associated with outcomes such as team performance (D'Innocenzo et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2014), innovation (Hoch, 2013), team cohesion and functioning (Grossman et al., 2022), and work engagement through relational and organisational resource mechanisms (Mazzetti et al., 2023; Schaufeli, 2021; Wu et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the contexts in which one or the other form predominates remain insufficiently mapped, particularly for the Eastern European space and for operationally intensive industries such as retail.

2.3 The Pandemic as a Disruptor of the Balance Between the Two Forms of Leadership

Major crises temporarily restructure the architecture of organisational processes. Two contradictory tendencies are described in the literature on organisational crisis response. The first - centralisation - is consistently documented: under conditions of extreme uncertainty, organisations tend to narrow decision-making circuits, consolidate top-down communication, and reactivate the heroic leader figure as a focal point for collective trust (Boin et al., 2013; James & Wooten, 2010). The second, opposing tendency - distributed self-organisation - emerges particularly in organisations with limited vertical capacity or mature teams, where crisis activates lateral coordination processes (Weick et al., 1999; Stoverink et al., 2020).

In the first weeks of March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic constituted precisely the type of shock capable of simultaneously activating mechanisms of decisional centralisation and mechanisms of distributed adaptation. For retail organisations in Romania - a sector with high physical contact intensity and positioned at the forefront of public debate regarding closures - the period of 11–16 March 2020 marked an abrupt transition from routine operations to crisis mode. Recent literature on work and leadership during the pandemic emphasises both the relevance of clear vertical communication and the role of autonomy and team cohesion in maintaining organisational functioning (Bartsch et al., 2020; Kniffin et al., 2021; Usman et al., 2021). Recent studies on work during the pandemic period show that acceptance of new forms of work organisation was influenced not only by functional factors such as productivity, but also by positive affective experiences, perceived autonomy and the sense of organisational support (Țuculea et al., 2025b). These findings support the idea that, in crisis contexts, employees' perceptions of work and organisational support become relevant to understanding engagement and adaptation.

The present paper, without having been designed as a longitudinal study, capitalises on the circumstantially forced overlap of the engagement survey with this temporal threshold to explore whether the perception of leadership shifted, and in what direction.

3. Methodology

3.1 Organisational Context and Sample

The data derive from an internal engagement survey administered to employees of an international retail company specialising in children's products, operating in Romania through ten physical stores located across two distinct regions (South-East and North-West) and a central office

structure. The survey was conducted online, on an anonymised basis, between 9 and 29 March 2020. The response rate is, by the nature of the instrument, not determinable post-hoc; the total number of valid respondents is $N = 99$.

Sample composition: 89 respondents from stores (51 North-West region, 38 South-East region) and 10 from the offices; 34 occupy leadership positions (34.3%), 65 are non-leaders; tenure within the company is relatively uniformly distributed: 28 between 3 and 6 months, 14 between 6 months and 1 year, 42 between 1 and 3 years, and 15 over 3 years. The temporal distribution of responses is as follows: 76 questionnaires were completed before 16 March 2020 (the date of the declaration of the state of emergency in Romania by Presidential Decree no. 195/2020) and 23 after this date.

3.2 Instrument

The instrument used is a 43-item engagement questionnaire on a Likert scale of 1–5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), organised into eight thematic blocks: affective engagement (8 items), communication and collaboration (11 items), competencies (4 items), working conditions (3 items), employee as brand ambassador (5 items), recognition (5 items), overall satisfaction (5 items), and vision–mission–strategy (2 items). These are supplemented by three Likert 1–10 NPS items concerning job satisfaction, intention to recommend the employer, and intention to recommend the company's products. Items are formulated in Romanian.

3.3 Construction of Composite Indices

To test the central hypotheses of the paper, two composite indices were constructed on the basis of a conceptual re-grouping of existing items. Selection followed a theoretical criterion - relational orientation (vertical vs. horizontal) and the attributed source of leadership (an identifiable person in a formal role vs. a diffuse collective process) - rather than a "blind" statistical reduction. The following two sub-sections describe the composition of each index.

Heroic Leadership Index (HEROIC)

This index comprises 9 items describing either the direct vertical relationship with the immediate hierarchical superior or top-down communication from senior management: periodic feedback received from the direct superior, its clarity and value, perceived support, trust in the superior, the superior's exemplary conduct, appreciation of engagement, satisfaction with the relationship with the direct manager, clarity of strategic communication from management level, and the visible commitment of management to strategy implementation.

Diffuse Leadership Index (DIFFUSE)

This index comprises 8 items describing collective or lateral processes: fulfilment of responsibilities by colleagues, perceived motivation of departmental colleagues, quality of organisational communication, cross-departmental collaboration, sense of team belonging, the ability to present ideas to the management team, participation in decision-making related to one's own work, and satisfaction with relationships with colleagues.

For each respondent, the composite score was calculated as the arithmetic mean of the constituent items, with a minimum requirement of 70% completed items for validity (a procedure consistent with Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). Four sub-indices were also constructed - for the decomposition analyses in section 4.3 - namely: SUPERVISOR (7 items concerning the relationship with the direct superior), TOP_MGMT (2 items concerning senior management), PEER_COHESION (6 items concerning cohesion with colleagues), and VOICE (2 items concerning participation and the expression of ideas).

3.4 Analytical Strategy

Analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics version 26, using standard procedures: DESCRIPTIVES and EXPLORE for descriptive statistics and normality tests (Shapiro-Wilk);

RELIABILITY for Cronbach's α coefficients and item-total statistics; PAIRED-SAMPLES T TEST for testing the heroic–diffuse asymmetry (within-subjects comparison); INDEPENDENT-SAMPLES T TEST for between-group comparisons, using the "Equal variances not assumed" row (Welch's test) when Levene's test indicates inequality of variances; BIVARIATE CORRELATIONS for the Pearson correlation matrix; and LINEAR REGRESSION (enter method) for estimating multiple regression models. Effect size was quantified using Cohen's d (for t-tests) and R^2 and adjusted R^2 (for regressions). Multicollinearity was monitored through the variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance, and residual autocorrelation through the Durbin-Watson statistic. In addition, for independent verification of the results, the indices were recalculated from the raw data using the same case validation rule; discrepancies relative to the initial output were documented in a separate file of corrected analyses.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

The two indices display excellent internal reliability, clearly exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.80 recommended for organisational research (Nunnally, 1978): $\alpha = 0.916$ for the heroic index (9 items) and $\alpha = 0.885$ for the diffuse index (8 items). The engagement index (8 items from the Q01 scale) yields $\alpha = 0.891$. The sub-indices used in the subsidiary analyses also display acceptable reliability levels (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Composite Indices

Index	No. of items	α Cronbach	Valid N	M	SD	Min	Max
HEROIC (heroic leadership)	9	0,916	96	4,32	0,73	1,89	5,00
DIFFUSE (diffuse leadership)	8	0,885	98	3,96	0,80	1,75	5,00
ENGAGEMENT (engagement)	8	0,891	95	3,94	0,75	1,50	5,00
– SUPERVISOR (sub-index)	7	0,921	97	4,41	0,72	2,14	5,00
– TOP_MGMT (sub-index)	2	0,921	94	3,99	1,10	1,00	5,00
– PEER_COHESION (sub-index)	6	0,868	98	3,88	0,84	1,50	5,00
– VOICE (sub-index)	2	0,846	95	4,21	0,95	1,00	5,00

4.2 The Heroic vs. Diffuse Leadership Asymmetry

The paired t-test confirms the existence of a significant difference between the two forms of perceived leadership within the same respondent: $M_{\text{heroic}} - M_{\text{diffuse}} = 0.354$ scale points (SD of difference = 0.463; $t(95) = 7.50$; $p < 0.001$; paired Cohen's $d = 0.766$). The effect size is large by conventional standards (Cohen, 1988). Recalculation of individual cases shows that 75 out of 96 respondents reported higher heroic than diffuse scores (78.1%), 6 had equal scores, and 15 reported higher diffuse than heroic scores.

Sub-dimension decomposition reveals that the asymmetry is driven primarily by the contrast between trust in the direct superior ($M = 4.41$) and cohesion with colleagues ($M = 3.88$) - a mean difference of 0.53 points. The intermediate dimensions - voice ($M = 4.21$) and top management ($M = 3.99$) - are positioned almost symmetrically between the two extremes. Figure 1 illustrates both the overall asymmetry and the sub-dimension decomposition.

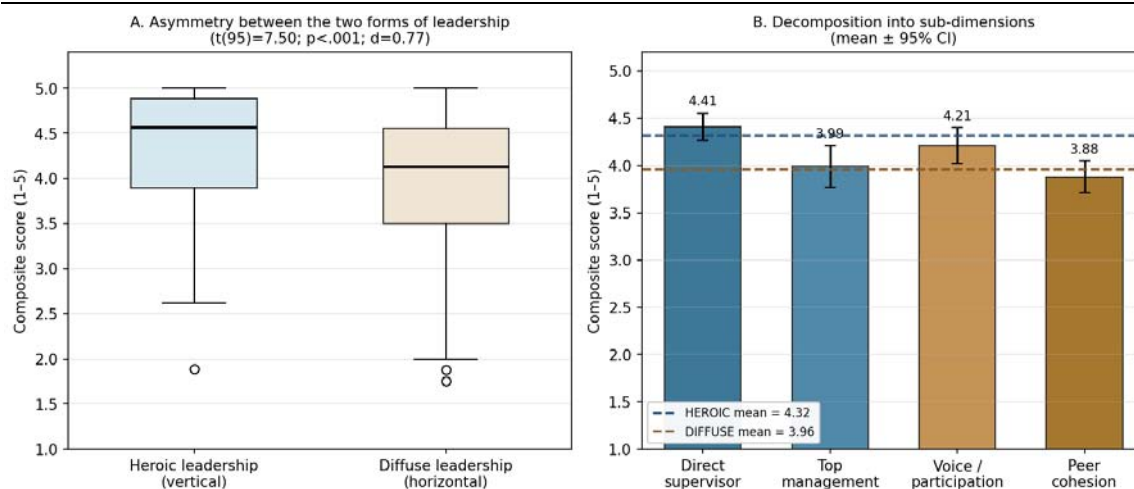


Figure 1. (A) Distribution of Composite Scores for Heroic and Diffuse Leadership

Figure 1. (B) Sub-dimension Means with 95% Confidence Intervals

Note: The horizontal dashed lines mark the overall mean values of the two main indices (HEROIC = 4.32; DIFFUSE = 3.96), serving as reference points for the positioning of the sub-dimensions.

Examination at the item level, presented in Table 2, confirms that the items with the lowest scores across the entire instrument belong to the diffuse block: perceived motivation of departmental colleagues (M = 3.26), cross-departmental collaboration (M = 3.57), and the fluidity of organisational communication (M = 3.63). The items with the highest scores, by contrast, describe the dyadic relationship with the direct superior: perceived support (M = 4.63), satisfaction with the relationship (M = 4.61), and trust in the superior (M = 4.59).

Table 2. Item-Level Descriptive Statistics

Item (as formulated in the questionnaire)	Index	M	SD	n
I can rely on my direct superior's support	HEROIC	4,63	0,74	98
Relationship with direct manager (satisfaction)	HEROIC	4,61	0,62	98
I trust my direct superior	HEROIC	4,59	0,77	98
I feel I am part of the team	DIFFUSE	4,38	1,01	98
Relationship with colleagues (satisfaction)	DIFFUSE	4,55	0,69	99
My direct superior is a role model	HEROIC	4,40	0,79	97
My direct manager appreciates my engagement	HEROIC	4,35	0,90	88
I can participate in decision-making	DIFFUSE	4,25	0,96	96
Feedback is clear and valuable	HEROIC	4,21	1,11	95
I have the opportunity to present ideas to management	DIFFUSE	4,15	1,10	96
I receive periodic feedback	HEROIC	4,09	1,17	96
Management shows commitment	HEROIC	4,03	1,09	94
Management communicates strategy clearly	HEROIC	3,96	1,18	96
Colleagues diligently fulfil their duties	DIFFUSE	3,87	0,98	98
Communication in the company runs smoothly	DIFFUSE	3,63	1,27	98
Departments collaborate well	DIFFUSE	3,57	1,26	94
People in my department are motivated	DIFFUSE	3,26	1,20	97

4.3 Predictors of Engagement: Multiple Regression^P

To assess the unique contribution of the two forms of leadership to engagement, a multiple linear regression model was estimated with HEROIC and DIFFUSE as predictors (Table 3). The overall model is significant ($R^2 = 0.448$; $F(2, 91) = 36.95$; $p < 0.001$; $N = 94$). The coefficients

show that the heroic index carries no significant unique contribution ($B = 0.035$; $\beta = 0.035$; $SE = 0.139$; $p = 0.799$), while the diffuse index is a significant predictor ($B = 0.605$; $\beta = 0.641$; $SE = 0.129$; $p < 0.001$). This pattern indicates that, after controlling for the shared variance of the two indices, only the variance specific to diffuse leadership remains significantly associated with engagement.

The correlation between the two indices is high ($r = 0.82$), and the variance inflation factors (VIF) are 3.06 for both predictors. This value falls below the conventional threshold of 10 used to flag severe multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2010), yet nonetheless indicates substantial conceptual overlap between the two indices, most plausibly attributable to both the semantically proximate content of some items and a general response positivity factor. The loss of significance in the HEROIC coefficient therefore reflects the fact that virtually all of the heroic index's engagement-related variance is also captured by the diffuse index. To control for this more precisely, the model was re-estimated using the four sub-dimensions with more specific content (Table 3).

Table 3. Multiple Regression with Sub-dimensions

Predictor	B (unstd.)	SE B	β (std.)	t	p	VIF
Intercept (const)	1,403	0,377	—	3,72	<0,001	—
SUPERVISOR	0,049	0,129	0,047	0,38	0,703	2,37
TOP_MGMT	-0,100	0,077	-0,149	-1,29	0,201	2,07
PEER_COHESION	0,452	0,114	0,512	3,97	<0,001	2,58
VOICE	0,234	0,087	0,301	2,69	0,009	1,95

$R^2 = 0.445$; $\text{adj-}R^2 = 0.420$; $F(4, 86) = 17.26$; $p < 0.001$; $N = 91$. All VIFs are below the threshold of 10, indicating the absence of severe multicollinearity.

The sub-dimension model nuances the pattern: the predictors carrying a significant unique contribution to engagement variance are the diffuse ones - peer cohesion ($\beta = 0.51$; $p < 0.001$) and voice ($\beta = 0.30$; $p = 0.009$) - while the heroic sub-dimensions (direct superior, top management) show no significant unique contributions once shared variance with the diffuse sub-dimensions is controlled for. Read with the caution required by a cross-sectional design, the result suggests that, in the data examined, affective engagement is associated more strongly with the quality of diffuse processes than with that of the immediate vertical relationship with the manager - an observation that contrasts with the classical managerial interpretation, in which the vertical relationship is placed at the centre of the engagement mechanism.

The complete correlation matrix between leadership sub-dimensions and the main outcome variables is presented in Figure 2.

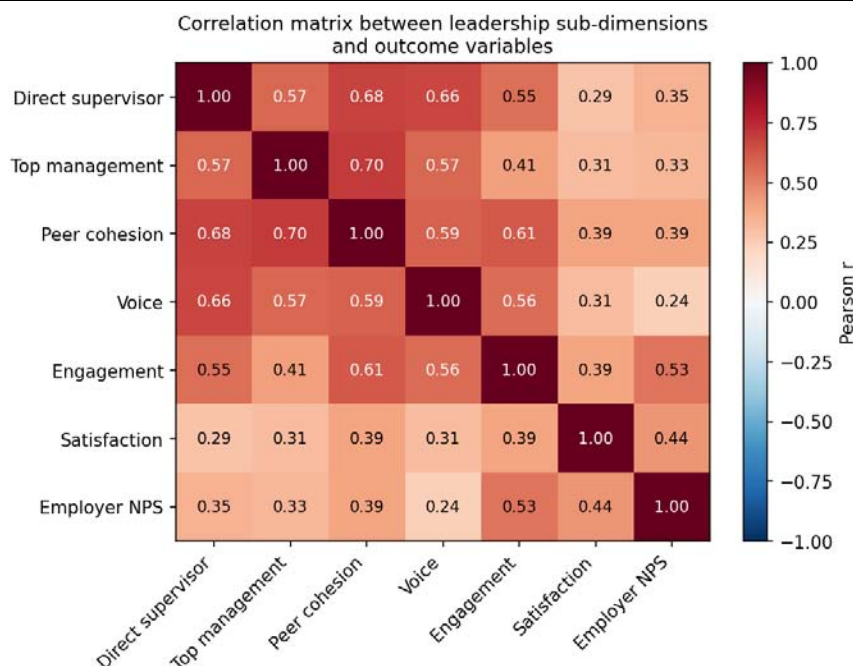


Figure 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix Between the Four Leadership Sub-dimensions and Outcome Variables (Engagement, Overall Satisfaction, Employer NPS).

4.4 Group Differences

To verify the robustness of the heroic–diffuse asymmetry across relevant sub-groups, comparisons were conducted along three demographic dimensions: unit type (store vs. office), leadership position (leader vs. non-leader), and completion timing (pre/post state of emergency, analysed separately in section 4.5).

Compared to non-leaders, leaders ($n = 34$) report significantly lower scores on both the heroic index ($M_{\text{leader}} = 4.09$ vs. $M_{\text{non-leader}} = 4.45$; $t(94) = -2.17$; $p = 0.034$; $d = -0.50$) and the diffuse index ($M_{\text{leader}} = 3.68$ vs. $M_{\text{non-leader}} = 4.11$; $t(96) = -2.58$; $p = 0.012$; $d = -0.57$). The magnitude of the gap ($\text{GAP} = \text{HEROIC} - \text{DIFFUSE}$), however, is similar across groups ($\text{GAP}_{\text{leader}} = 0.42$ vs. $\text{GAP}_{\text{non-leader}} = 0.32$; $t = 0.94$; $p = 0.35$), suggesting that the fundamental asymmetry is a feature of the organisational context rather than an artefact of managers' differentially evaluative perspective.

The store vs. office comparison indicates, at the margin of statistical significance, higher heroic scores in stores ($M = 4.38$ vs. $M = 3.73$; $t(9.1) = 1.96$; $p = 0.083$; $d = 0.92$). This result must be interpreted with caution given the small size of the office sub-sample ($n = 10$). The pattern nonetheless suggests a testable hypothesis: in stores with a clear hierarchical structure and physical managerial presence, heroic leadership is more visible than in the office environment where activities are more autonomous.

4.5 Changes at the Threshold of the Declaration of the State of Emergency (Exploratory Analysis)

The distribution of the 99 questionnaires across two temporal windows - before ($n = 76$) and after ($n = 23$) 16 March 2020, the date of Presidential Decree no. 195 on the institution of the state of emergency - permits an exploratory comparison. We emphasise that this comparison cannot attain the statistical power required for firm conclusions: the imbalance in group sizes, the absence of randomisation, and the presence of potential confounding factors - third variables that may simultaneously influence both the timing of questionnaire completion and the responses given (for example, a self-selection effect among late respondents, or fatigue from the internal communication

campaign) - require that results be interpreted strictly as a descriptive pattern. With this caveat, the data are presented in Table 4 and illustrated in Figure 3.

Table 4. Pre/Post State of Emergency Scores (16 March 2020)

Index / sub-index	M_pre (n=76)	M_post (n=23)	Δ	d Cohen	p
HEROIC	4,33	4,29	-0,04	-0,05	0,840
DIFFUSE	3,98	3,92	-0,06	-0,07	0,786
SUPERVISOR	4,43	4,33	-0,10	-0,14	0,594
TOP_MGMT	3,94	4,13	+0,19	+0,17	0,497
PEER_COHESION	3,90	3,81	-0,09	-0,11	0,681
VOICE	4,21	4,23	+0,02	+0,02	0,935
ENGAGEMENT	3,92	4,03	+0,11	+0,15	0,617

Note: None of the differences reaches the statistical threshold of $\alpha = 0.05$. They are presented for their descriptive value regarding the direction of change.

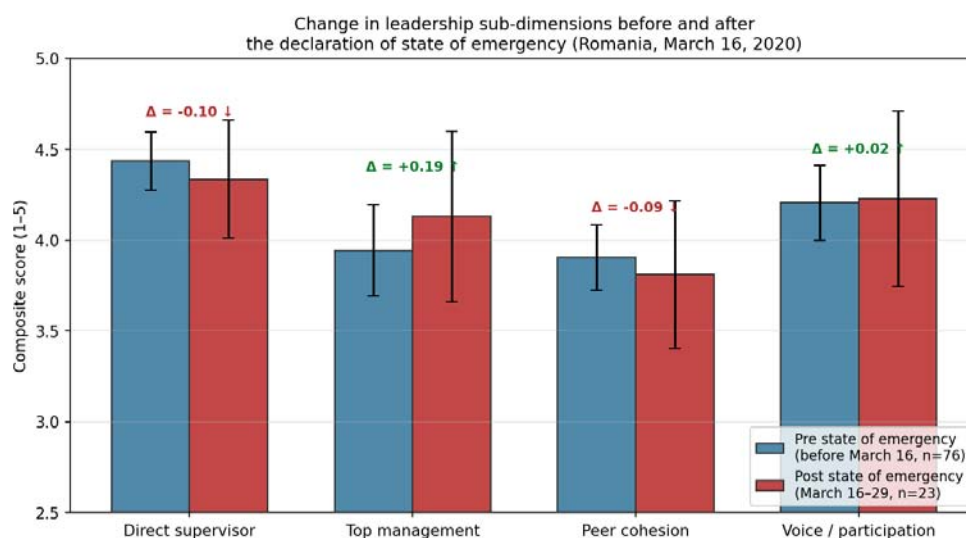


Figure 3. Mean scores of leadership sub-dimensions before and after the declaration of the state of emergency in Romania (16 March 2020). Error bars: 95% confidence intervals.

The descriptive pattern is worth noting. The only sub-dimension displaying a change in a positive direction, with a small effect size ($d = 0.17$), is the perception of senior management - strategy communication and visibility of commitment. The two sub-dimensions associated with proximal relational fabric - the relationship with the direct superior (immediate vertical axis) and cohesion with colleagues (horizontal axis) - show small decreases (-0.10 and -0.09, respectively). Voice remains practically unchanged, while affective engagement (ENGAGEMENT) increases marginally. We reiterate that none of these effects is statistically significant at the current N, and all effect sizes fall below the threshold of 0.2; the pattern remains descriptive. Possible interpretations and their limitations are discussed in section 5.3.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Observed Asymmetry and Its Interpretation

The principal finding of the study is robust: in a Romanian retail organisation in 2020, the perception of leadership displays a pronounced asymmetry, with high trust in the vertical relationship with the direct superior and a more cautious evaluation of horizontal collaboration processes. The effect size ($d = 0.77$) places this asymmetry in the register of large-magnitude

phenomena, and the pattern is found consistently across the majority of constituent items as well as across the demographic sub-groups examined.

The data suggest that, in this organisational context, the perception of leadership is structured predominantly around the figure of the direct manager. The lateral fabric - cross-departmental collaboration, mutual motivation among colleagues, frictionless communication between units - is evaluated more cautiously. Without being able to formulate causal claims on the basis of a cross-sectional design, this perceptual configuration is compatible with an organisation in which the leading function is attributed in a relatively centralised manner to the superior-subordinate dyadic relationship, and in which collective leading processes have not yet attained comparable visibility for employees.

The principal theoretical implication is of a methodological order. The heroic/diffuse distinction, proposed by Fletcher (2004) and subsequently formalised in the distributed leadership literature, can be operationalised empirically through the re-grouping of items from standard engagement instruments, without the need to construct a dedicated scale. This opens a practical avenue for re-reading existing organisational data through the lens of the two paradigms.

5.2 The Asymmetry and the Engagement–Employer NPS Paradox

An additional observation, derived from the raw survey data, provides context for interpreting the results. Overall affective engagement is high (mean 3.94 - approximately 79% on the percentage scale commonly used in engagement benchmarks), yet the intention to recommend the employer to friends or family is, in aggregate, negative, at the level of the NPS index calculated on the aggregated data. In other words, the data describe a population of employees who are engaged in their work, yet reluctant to bring those close to them into this organisation.

The heroic/diffuse framework offers one possible reading of this configuration. The regression results (Table 3) show that, in the data examined, engagement is specifically associated with diffuse processes - team cohesion and voice - rather than with the dyadic relationship with the manager, once shared variance is controlled for. For overall satisfaction, a similar pattern emerges: in the two-predictor model, only DIFFUSE carries a significant unstandardised coefficient ($B = 0.84$; $\beta = 0.39$; $p = 0.021$), while HEROIC loses significance ($B = 0.01$; $p = 0.98$). A possible explanation is that the strong vertical relationship sustains individual engagement in a fragmented manner - each employee relates positively to their own manager - without generating a sufficiently articulated collective representation to transform employees into organisational ambassadors. The ambassador role presupposes an organisational attachment that transcends the dyadic relationship, which - in this sample - appears to be fed preferentially by diffuse processes.

5.3 Descriptive Pattern at the Threshold of the Declaration of the State of Emergency - An Exploratory Observation

This sub-section must be preceded by an express and non-negotiable methodological warning. The post-state-of-emergency sub-sample comprises only 23 respondents, of whom 7 responded after the effective introduction of movement restrictions (25 March). None of the pre/post differences reaches the conventional statistical significance threshold ($p < 0.05$), and the observed effect sizes are small ($|d| < 0.2$). The design is not a genuine longitudinal one; it is a cross-sectional survey whose temporal window accidentally encompassed a major social event. The discussion that follows therefore remains strictly at a descriptive level: it does not test a hypothesis, does not confirm a mechanism, and does not produce causal evidence. Its function is to flag a pattern to be considered in future studies with an appropriate design.

With these caveats, the descriptive pattern (Figure 3) is compatible - without constituting proof - with the hypothesis of centralisation of leadership perception under crisis conditions, discussed in the specialist literature (Boin et al., 2013). The sub-dimension recording the only visibly positive change is the perception of senior management - clarity of strategic communication

and visible commitment - which increases by +0.19 points ($d = 0.17$). The sub-dimensions associated with proximal relational fabric - the direct superior and cohesion with colleagues - show small decreases (-0.10 and -0.09, respectively). All of these differences nonetheless remain within the range of expected fluctuations at the post-sample size.

Were this pattern to be confirmed in larger samples, it might suggest that the first days of the pandemic crisis activated a temporary reconfiguration of organisational attention toward the top of the hierarchy, in line with what James and Wooten (2010) have termed "crisis leadership recentering." The formulation remains hypothetical, however: the pattern observed here is compatible with this interpretation, but does not demonstrate it. Equally plausible are alternative explanations: self-selection among late respondents (those who respond later may differ systematically from those who respond promptly), internal campaign fatigue, or simply sampling variation. The distinction between these mechanisms cannot be made with the current data.

5.4 Practical Implications for Multi-location Retail

For practitioners in retail who use similar engagement surveys, the paper suggests three methodological and managerial recommendations. First, aggregating reports into a single mean score - a common practice in Human Resources reporting - may mask the heroic/diffuse asymmetry and consequently lead to erroneous conclusions regarding the source of engagement. Re-grouping items along the two dimensions is a simple exercise, but a diagnostically useful one.

Second, when the deficit is localised on the diffuse dimension - as is the case here - classical manager-centred leadership development interventions (coaching, management training) may be insufficient. The relevant levers become: communities of practice across stores, staff rotation between units, peer-to-peer recognition, cross-departmental communication mechanisms, and collective upward feedback rituals.

Third, the employer NPS indicator can be used as a signal complementary to engagement. When engagement is high but employer NPS is negative, the organisation may have a deficit of diffuse leadership or positive collective representation, even if the manager-subordinate relationship is well evaluated. This interpretation remains a managerial hypothesis derived from the present data, not a causal conclusion.

In the Romanian context, recent research on strategic human resource management emphasises that organisational transformations depend not exclusively on formal instruments or digital systems, but also on organisational culture, managerial support, readiness for change, and the way in which employees interpret the legitimacy of HR initiatives (State et al., 2026). This perspective is relevant to the present analysis, as the difference between vertical leadership and horizontal collaboration processes can be understood as an expression of an organisational culture situated between hierarchical control and distributed participation.

6. Limitations

The study presents limitations that must be made explicit. First, the data derive from a single organisation, a single industry (speciality retail) and a single country (Romania). Generalisability is therefore limited; we treat the study as a single-case quantitative study in the sense of Yin (2018), rather than as a nomothetic study.

Second, the sample size ($N = 99$) is sufficient for testing central effects of medium or large magnitude, but insufficient for detecting small effects, particularly in sub-group comparisons. The office sub-sample ($n = 10$) and the post-state-of-emergency sub-sample ($n = 23$) are especially small and require interpretation as exploratory.

Third, the instrument used was not designed ex ante as a heroic vs. diffuse leadership scale, but as a standard engagement instrument. The indices constructed are therefore post-hoc, even if the re-grouping was carried out on conceptual grounds. Independent validation through confirmatory factor analysis on a larger sample would strengthen the approach.

Fourth, the high correlation between the two indices ($r = 0.819$) signals a substantial degree of shared variance, attributable either to conceptual overlap between the dimensions or to a general response positivity factor. Nevertheless, the recalculated VIF for the model with the two indices is 3.056, below the conventional threshold of 10; the issue should be treated as interpretive overlap rather than severe multicollinearity. The models with more specific sub-dimensions (Table 4) partially control for this concern, but do not eliminate it entirely.

Fifth, the cross-sectional design does not permit causal inference. The association between peer cohesion and engagement may be mediated by unobserved factors and may partly reflect reverse causality (engaged employees perceive their team more positively).

7. Conclusions

The empirical study presented operationalises the distinction between heroic and diffuse leadership on the basis of a standard engagement instrument applied to a Romanian retail organisation between 9 and 29 March 2020. Three conclusions emerge.

The first: the data suggest that the organisation studied operates perceptually in a predominantly heroic logic, with a systematic asymmetry between vertical trust - high - and horizontal collaboration - moderate. This asymmetry is robust across the sample, carries a large effect size, and is found consistently across the majority of items.

The second: affective engagement, when analysed multivariately, is specifically associated with diffuse processes - peer cohesion and voice - and not with the vertical relationship with the manager, after controlling for the remaining predictors. This result supports, for the context studied, recent hypotheses from the distributed leadership and team cohesion literature (D'Innocenzo et al., 2016; Grossman et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2020) and carries direct practical implications for the architecture of organisational development interventions.

The third, exploratory: the descriptive model of change at the threshold of the declaration of the state of emergency suggests - without demonstrating - a centralisation of organisational attention toward senior management, consistent with the crisis leadership literature. Validation of this observation requires longitudinal studies with sufficient statistical power.

Directions for further research include: replication of the analysis across other industries and national contexts; development of a dedicated heroic/diffuse leadership scale validated through confirmatory factor analysis; longitudinal studies capable of capturing the dynamics of the heroic–diffuse balance during periods of crisis and recovery; and investigation of cultural moderators (power distance, individualism) that may influence the localisation of the asymmetry across different national contexts.

8.Referințe bibliografice

- [1] **Bartsch, S., Weber, E., Büttgen, M., & Huber, A.**, Leadership matters in crisis-induced digital transformation: How to lead service employees effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Service Management*, 32(1), 71-85. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JOSM-05-2020-0160>, 2020.
- [2] **Bass, B. M.**, *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. Free Press, 1985.
- [3] **Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E.**, *Transformational leadership* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006.
- [4] **Boin, A., Kuipers, S., & Overdijk, W.**, Leadership in times of crisis: A framework for assessment. *International Review of Public Administration*, 18(1), 79-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/12294659.2013.10805241>, 2013.
- [5] **Carlyle, T.**, *On heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history*. Houghton Mifflin. (Original work published 1841), 1907.
- [6] **Carson, J. B., Tesluk, P. E., & Marrone, J. A.**, Shared leadership in teams: An investigation of antecedent conditions and performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(5), 1217-1234. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2007.20159921>, 2007.

- [7] **Cohen, J.**, *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988.
- [8] **Collinson, D., & Tourish, D.**, Teaching leadership critically: New directions for leadership pedagogy. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 14(4), 576-594. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2014.0079>, 2015.
- [9] **Crevani, L., Lindgren, M., & Packendorff, J.**, Leadership, not leaders: On the study of leadership as practices and interactions. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 26(1), 77-86, 2010.
- [10] **Cronbach, L. J., & Meehl, P. E.**, Construct validity in psychological tests. *Psychological Bulletin*, 52(4), 281-302, 1955.
- [11] **D’Innocenzo, L., Mathieu, J. E., & Kukenberger, M. R.**, A meta-analysis of different forms of shared leadership–team performance relations. *Journal of Management*, 42(7), 1964-1991, 2016.
- [12] **Denis, J.-L., Langley, A., & Sergi, V.**, Leadership in the plural. *Academy of Management Annals*, 6(1), 211-283, 2012.
- [13] **Diaconescu, V.**, What is the perception of economics students about a career in sales? *Cactus Tourism Journal*, 1(1), 12-21, 2019.
- [14] **Fletcher, J. K.**, The paradox of postheroic leadership: An essay on gender, power, and transformational change. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15(5), 647-661, 2004.
- [15] **Graen, G. B., & Uhl-Bien, M.**, Relationship-based approach to leadership: Development of leader-member exchange (LMX) theory of leadership over 25 years. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 6(2), 219-247, 1995.
- [16] **Gronn, P.**, Distributed leadership as a unit of analysis. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 13(4), 423-451, 2002.
- [17] **Grossman, R., Nolan, K., Rosch, Z., Mazer, D., & Salas, E.**, The team cohesion-performance relationship: A meta-analysis exploring measurement approaches and the changing team landscape. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 12(2), 181–238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20413866211041157>, 2022.
- [18] **Hair, J. F., Black, W. C., Babin, B. J., & Anderson, R. E.**, *Multivariate data analysis* (7th ed.). Pearson, 2010.
- [19] **Hoch**, Shared leadership and innovation: The role of vertical leadership and employee integrity. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 28(2), 159-174, 2013.
- [20] **James, E. H., & Wooten, L. P.**, *Leading under pressure: From surviving to thriving before, during, and after a crisis*. Routledge, 2010.
- [21] **Kniffin, K. M., Narayanan, J., Anseel, F., Antonakis, J., Ashford, S. P., Bakker, A. B., Bamberger, P., Bapuji, H., Bhawe, D. P., Choi, V. K., Creary, S. J., Demerouti, E., Flynn, F. J., Gelfand, M. J., Greer, L. L., Johns, G., Kesebir, S., Klein, P. G., Lee, S. Y., Ozcelik, H., Petriglieri, J. L., Rothbard, N. P., Rudolph, C. W., Shaw, J. D., Sirola, N., Wanberg, C. R., Whillans, A., Wilmot, M. P., & van Vugt, M.**, COVID-19 and the workplace: Implications, issues, and insights for future research and action. *American Psychologist*, 76(1), 63-77. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000716>, 2021.
- [22] **Mazzetti, G., Robledo, E., Vignoli, M., Topa, G., Guglielmi, D., & Schaufeli, W. B.**, Work engagement: A meta-analysis using the job demands-resources model. *Psychological Reports*, 126(3), 1069-1107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00332941211051988>, 2023.
- [23] **Nunnally, J. C.**, *Psychometric theory* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill, 1978.
- [24] **Pearce, C. L., & Conger, J. A. (Eds.)**, *Shared leadership: Reframing the hows and whys of leadership*. Sage, 2003.
- [25] **Schaufeli, W.**, Engaging leadership: How to promote work engagement? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 754556. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.754556>, 2021.
- [26] **Spillane, J. P.**, *Distributed leadership*. Jossey-Bass, 2006.

- [27] **State, O., Preda, D.-M., Mocanu, D.-E., & Diaconescu, V.**, Managing human resources strategically in Romania: An exploratory qualitative study of digital transformation, sustainability and cultural influences. *Merits*, 6(2), 9. <https://doi.org/10.3390/merits6020009>, 2026
- [28] **Stoverink, A. C., Kirkman, B. L., Mistry, S., & Rosen, B.**, Bouncing back together: Toward a theoretical model of work team resilience. *Academy of Management Review*, 45(2), 395-422, 2020.
- [29] **Țuclea, C.-E., Vrânceanu, D.-M., Anghel, L.-D., & Diaconescu, V.**, Digital skills and motivation in sales careers: Bridging job attractiveness and career intentions. *Systems*, 13(1), 16. <https://doi.org/10.3390/systems13010016>, 2025a.
- [30] **Țuclea, C.-E., Vrânceanu, D.-M., & Diaconescu, V.**, From quarantine to normality: How emotions and productivity concerns influence the intention to continue teleworking. In *25th International Joint Conference Central and Eastern Europe in the Changing Business Environment: Proceedings* (pp. 351-362). <https://doi.org/10.53465/CEECEBE.2025.9788022552257.351-362>, 2025b.
- [31] **Usman, M., Ghani, U., Cheng, J., Farid, T., & Iqbal, S.**, Does participative leadership matter in employees' outcomes during COVID-19? Role of leader behavioral integrity. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 646442. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.646442>, 2021.
- [32] **Wang, D., Waldman, D. A., & Zhang, Z.**, A meta-analysis of shared leadership and team effectiveness. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 99(2), 181-198, 2014.
- [33] **Weber, M.**, *Economy and society* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds. & Trans.). University of California Press. (Original work published 1922), 1968.
- [34] **Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D.**, Organizing for high reliability: Processes of collective mindfulness. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 21, 81-123, 1999.
- [35] **Wu, Q., Cormican, K., & Chen, G.**, A meta-analysis of shared leadership: Antecedents, consequences, and moderators. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 27(1), 49-64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051818820862>, 2020.
- [36] **Yin, R. K.**, *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage, 2018.