The Critical Role of Organizational Leaders in Fostering Employee Engagement in the Time of Pandemic

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Abstract:

With the advent of covid-19 and the exacerbation of the VUCA world, organizational models have been revised and a remote working environment has become the new reality for several firms. The purpose of the present study was to identify the emotional, social and cognitive intelligence competencies of organizational leaders that are deemed particularly important by their subordinates to increase engagement within this scenario. The methodology used consisted of an exploratory quantitative study on online surveys from 188 participants working in diverse Italian organizational contexts. What emerged is that leaders in times of crisis are expected to dominate reality by managing conflicting emotions and reducing uncertainties to transform the world into a rational and intelligible setting, while allowing their subordinates the right degree of autonomy. The paper contributes to the literature on organizational leadership competencies and responses to crises by providing practical implications and future research avenues.

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1. Introduction

The advent of covid-19 in 2020 triggered a global health crisis that forced organizations to shut down offices, revise their business models and operate in a new way (Khalil et al., 2020). By increasing the degree of uncertainty and situational novelty, the pandemic exacerbated the already complex VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) world (OECD, 2020): an unstable, chaotic and rapidly changing work setting (Lawrence, 2013). The crisis has represented a major driver of digital transformation (Bartsch et al., 2020), accelerating the digitalization process that was already in place and inducing it in less virtual companies. A remote working environment with employees geographically dispersed around the world and interacting through technology on a continuous basis has, in fact, become the new reality for several firms (Green et al., 2020).

Overall, the pandemic has resulted in an ultimate test for leadership in different organizations of various industries (Dirani et al., 2020). Not only do leaders have the critical responsibility to respond to the crisis while preserving the financial stability and image of the firm, but they also need to keep the morale and welfare of their employees high (Caringal-Go et al., 2021) by creating a positive and inclusive climate. The literature on crisis leadership indicates a strong relationship between organizational leadership and employee morale, engagement and performance (Bass et al., 2003; Chen, 2004; Busse and Weider, 2020; Chua and Ayoko, 2021; Koekemoer et al., 2021). Leadership, and particularly remote leadership, becomes "one of the biggest drivers in transformation" of the workplace (World Economic Forum, 2009), which should be able to leverage on various digital means to lead employees effectively in complex and fast-changing conditions. Leaders need to leverage on their emotional intelligence in order to create a positive workplace and increase employee motivation (Boyatzis, 2009), navigate tensions with a rapid response, communicate honestly in real time and accept mistakes on the go (Forster et al., 2020), and most of all, make sure that employees feel engaged and put first so that they can "employ and express themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally" (Kahn, 1990). The responses of the engaged workforce should consist of higher loyalty (Macey and Schneider, 2008), creativity (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008) and productivity (Kahn, 1990) enabling them to perform at their best and better achieve organizational goals. Employee engagement represents, therefore, a prominent construct for promoting organizational success (Kahn, 1990; Rich et al., 2010; Ghadi et al., 2013), enhancing organizational commitment (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008) and creating job satisfaction (Rayton and Yalabik, 2014).

The literature confirms that, among other factors, the construct of employee engagement is significantly influenced by the leader's attitude, traits and behavior towards their subordinates (Carasco-Soul et al., 2014; Decuypere & Schaufeli, 2020). The relationship between leadership and employee engagement has been widely investigated by scholars, though there are few studies delving into specific leadership competencies that influence engagement in times of crisis, such as during the pandemic period.

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In light of these considerations, the present paper analyzes the emotional, social and cognitive intelligence competencies of organizational leaders that are deemed particularly important in fueling employee engagement in critical contexts. The adoption of a grounded theoretical framework (Boyatzis, 2009) allowed for investigating the leaders' competencies that employees encountered, but most of all the ones they desired within a setting where the health crisis and the introduction of remote or hybrid working have strongly impacted the leader-follower dynamics. The aim is to understand, based on implicit leadership theories (Tabassum et al., 2023), how the subordinates' perceptions of their leaders have changed during such time of discontinuity, to offer some hints from the perspective of an effective leadership model for an uncertain future.

The research aims to contribute to the literature on crisis leadership and advance understanding of the relationship between the leader competencies and employee engagement, a crucial condition for dealing with times of crisis. The structure of the study is as follows: first, the analysis of the literature and the theoretical framework are provided; second, the methodology adopted for the purpose of the study is presented; third, the results of the analysis conducted are explained; last, the main conclusions are drawn and questions to be addressed by future research are provided.

2. Literature analysis and theoretical framework

2.1 Crises leadership and emotions

The topic of crisis leadership has gained momentum after the crises that characterized the 2010s: financial, health, climate, political and social crises require a growing deployment of specific competencies to address the urgency and uniqueness of disruptive events. In extraordinary situations, the well-being of communities depends mainly on the leadership skills of their executive authorities (Beilstein et al., 2021) as the covid-19 pandemic has shown.

The literature has developed in a fragmented way and has focused primarily on the effects of crises on leadership styles and the qualities required of leaders, as well as the different behaviors that specific levels of leaders have shown in response to crises.

According to Dirani et al. (2020) the leadership competencies required in critical times are linked to the new needs of employees caused by the crisis, in particular listening, supporting, accounting for emotions and energy, as well as flexibility, communication and distributing leadership to activate an interactive decision-making to cope with unusual difficulties.

What emerges is an extremely complex competencies profile in which adaptability, the ability to make sense of the situation and to recognize the needs of one's collaborators and promote employees' well-being represent the fundamental qualities.

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However, the research has almost neglected emotion management that helps leaders alleviate negative feelings and foster positive emotions of collaborators in times of crises (Wu et al., 2021). Among the few studies, the empirical research has dealt with the positive impact of affective mechanisms (Sommer et al., 2016) activated in the context of transformational leadership and the resonant leadership approach (Gaan et al., 2023) based on emotional intelligence. The latter gives importance to the dimensions of hope, compassion, mindfulness, and altruistic feelings, which are aspects underlying the socialization process and support organizational transformation in times of crisis.

An interesting theoretical study, based on upper echelons approach to organizational crises (König et al., 2018) highlights the positive effects of leaders' empathy and the role of emotions in crisis management but also the risk of distorting effects and loss of effectiveness when empathy is excessive.

Another aspect overlooked so far concerns the modulation of the leader's characteristics with respect to the specific crisis context, in response to the various issues affecting the organization and leadership. The study by Stoker et al. (2019) and Garretsen et al. (2022) deal with the effects of relevant external shock, showing that the context is an antecedent of leadership behavior.

Overall, the literature has addressed only marginally the role of emotions and emotional intelligence in crisis contexts.

2.2. Competencies as a behavioral approach to emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been identified as one of the most important elements of effective crisis leaders (Lockwood, 2005). According to Goleman (1998), it consists of a person's self-awareness, self-confidence, self-control, commitment and integrity, and a person's ability to communicate, influence, initiate and accept change. EI is based on the identification, use and constructive management of one's emotional states and the emotional states of others to increase motivation and effectively engage in relationships (Emmerling et al., 2008). As the pandemic has brought a high degree of uncertainty which led to a loss of control and emotional disturbances in both leaders and their subordinates, EI has been recognized as fundamental in organizational relationships. Several studies have shown that the EI of the team leader can positively influence employee performance and organizational performance as well as team success (Koman and Wolf, 2008; Vidyarthi et al., 2014; Krén and Séllei, 2021) through emotional and social competencies. In the literature, a competency has been defined as a capability or ability (Boyatzis, 1982, 2008; McClelland, 1973, 1985) that consists of related but different sets of behavior organized around an underlying construct called the intent. Competency theory has been studied by various scholars throughout time, with different nuances and applications (McClelland, 1973; Boyatzis, 1982; Sparrow, 1997; Stuart and Lindsay, 1997).

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In 2009, Richard E. Boyatzis attempted to review and merge 30 years of research to highlight two different sets of competencies in organizational contexts: a first set includes threshold abilities as minimal requirements for the job or role, and a second set includes competencies that are learned capacities that set apart outstanding managerial and leadership performance from the average kind.

The first set of threshold competencies consists of:
1) Expertise and experience;
2) Knowledge (i.e., declarative, procedural, functional, and meta-cognitive);
3) Basic cognitive competencies (i.e., memory and deductive reasoning).

The second set of competencies consists of:
1) Emotional intelligence competencies, which refer to the "ability to recognize, understand, and use emotional information about oneself that leads to or causes effective or superior performance";
2) Social intelligence competencies, which refers to the "ability to recognize, understand and use emotional information about others that leads to or causes effective or superior performance".
3) Cognitive intelligence competencies, which refers to the "ability to think about and analyze information and situations that lead to or cause effective or superior performance" and are generally used in academic contexts but were included in the survey of the present study to obtain insights into the logical reasoning and abilities of leaders.

The Emotional and Social Competency Inventory (ESCI) survey, consisting of 12 dimensions that measure 5 areas of emotional intelligence and 7 areas of social intelligence, and the later version of ESCI-U, comprising 4 additional cognitive intelligence competencies, were developed by Boyatzis and Goleman to provide valuable data about human resource capability (Boyatzis & Ratti, 2009). The framework has been applied to leaders and managers in non-pandemic contexts to help them assess which are the emotional, social and cognitive intelligence competencies that set effective leaders apart. However, according to the authors' knowledge, there has been no attempt in the literature to understand how the followers' perceptions of their leaders have changed within the pandemic scenario and which leadership competencies are deemed particularly important to fuel engagement in the "new normal" (Zeegen et al., 2020). In particular, the framework developed by Boyatzis on leadership competencies has not yet been applied to crisis leadership in organizations.

Due to its comprehensiveness and to the fact that it was developed on the basis of consolidated research, the ESCI-U (Table 1 below) was therefore adopted for the purpose of the present study, which aimed to identify the state-of-the-art and the desirability of the leaders' emotional, social and cognitive intelligence competencies as seen by their subordinates in order to work at their best in the pandemic period.

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Table n. 1 - Emotional, social and cognitive intelligence competencies

(1) Emotional intelligence competencies:
• *Self-awareness* cluster concerns knowing one's internal states, preferences, resources, and intuitions. It contains one competency:
– *Emotional self-awareness*: recognizing one's emotions and their effects.
• *Self-management* cluster refers to managing one's internal states, impulses, and resources. It contains four competencies:
– *Emotional self-control:* keeping disruptive emotions and impulses in check.
– *Adaptability*: flexibility in handling change.
– *Achievement orientation*: striving to improve or meeting a standard of excellence.
– *Positive outlook:* seeing the positive aspects of things and the future.
(2) Social intelligence competencies:
• *Social awareness* cluster refers to how people handle relationships and awareness of others' feelings, needs, and concerns. It contains two competencies:
– *Empathy:* sensing others' feelings and perspectives, and taking an active interest in their concerns.
– *Organizational awareness*: reading a group's emotional currents and power relationships.
• *Relationship management* cluster concerns the skill or adeptness at inducing desirable responses in others. It contains five competencies:
– *Coach and mentor*: sensing others' development needs and bolstering their abilities.
– *Inspirational leadership*: inspiring and guiding individuals and groups.
– *Influence:* wielding effective tactics for persuasion.
– *Conflict management:* negotiating and resolving disagreements.
– *Teamwork:* working with others toward shared goals. Creating group synergy in pursuing collective goals.
(3) Cognitive intelligence competencies
• *Systems thinking*: perceiving multiple causal relationships in understanding phenomena or events.
• *Pattern recognition*: perceiving themes or patterns in seemingly random items, events, or phenomena.

Source: Boyatzis (2009)

Emotional Self-Awareness is the ability to tune into one's own feelings, sense inner signals, and recognize how our emotions can affect ourselves, others, and the environment (Goleman et al., 2017e), through a conscious and skillful approach.

Emotional Self-Control is the ability to stay calm and keep disruptive emotions and impulses in check for the good of the group, even in stressful and hostile situations (Goleman et al., 2017e).

Adaptability is one of the most important characteristics of crisis leadership, as it translates into thriving, recovering and responding with courage to uncertainties while preparing the next normal (Goleman et al., 2017b).

An achievement orientation, where leaders strive to improve daily in the attempt to meet a standard of excellence, is the key to turning the health-crisis challenges into opportunities and laying the basis for a long-term competitive advantage (Goleman et al., 2017a).

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A positive outlook, which doesn't mean denying or neglecting the crisis but rather acknowledging it, provides the ground for innovation and opportunity, facilitating greater outcomes and performance (Goleman et al., 2017f; Forster et al., 2020).

Showing empathy towards others when coping with the crisis sets the ground for social awareness and relationship management (Morrison, 2008), as it allows leaders to provide both personal and professional support and make the difference in their subordinates' life in a truly human way.

A leader, besides building and maintaining a relationship with followers, must have organizational awareness: encourage relationships among team members by identifying influencers, networks, and dynamics within the organization as well as fostering group synergy.

To foster learning in the long-term, leaders must give constant feedback and support to their subordinates, sense their development needs and bolster their abilities (Goleman et al., 2017c).

A crisis may require leaders who inspire employees with positive changes and a sense of purpose beyond day-to-day tasks, to enable them to feel engaged and express their full potential (Harwati, 2013; Forster et al., 2020) even in a remote working context, where they have far less direct contact.

In times of change, such as during a health crisis, persuasion represents a salient leadership trait and one of the main sources of motivation of followers to pursue the company vision, reduce stress and generate hope for the future (Caringal-Go et al., 2021).

With agile working, conflicts are likely to emerge, either because employees do not follow guidelines of the "new normal", or because leaders do not respond quickly enough to employee concerns. Conflict management requires recognizing the nature of the conflict, bringing up disagreements and adopting an approach that can be endorsed by all team members (Goleman et al., 2017d).

Another important human trait that the leader must possess within the pandemic scenario consists of the ability to create teamwork by bringing people together through a network of teams with distributed authority that can implement decisions without approval to achieve both team and organizational effectiveness (McKinsey & company, 2021; Forster et al., 2020).

Finally, conceptual skills enable leaders to solve problems of different types and help their subordinates succeed (Jimenez et al., 2021): system thinking consists of the ability to identify multiple causal relationships in understanding phenomena or events, while pattern recognition consists of deductive reasoning, such as the ability to identify themes or patterns in seemingly random data (Boyatzis and Ratti, 2009).

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3. Materials and methods

3.1 Survey

To investigate the state-of-the-art and the desirable leaders' emotional, social and cognitive intelligence competencies from the point of view of the subordinates in the pandemic period, a survey was built upon already validated items of previous studies (Boyatzis and Goleman, 2008; D'Amato & Macchi, 2015). The section dealing with cognitive competencies of the ESCI-U, previously applied only to academic contexts, was taken into consideration in the organizational context because the survey was aimed at investigating the brain-intensive roles of leaders. No further items were added based on the authors' own elaboration.

The methodology employed for the purpose of the study was quantitative due to the need to collect large quantities of standardized data in a relatively short time span and to have the possibility to replicate the study in future research without the pretense of generalizing the results to the Italian context.

Data were collected through a survey divided into two parts, with two main objectives.

The first part was aimed at collecting company/employee specifics and preferences:
- the demographic variables of respondents (i.e., subordinates), including gender, age, role, length of service and their functional area;
- the characteristics of the company, such as industry and size;
- some information on the relationship between the respondent and his or her leader, namely the period of time reporting to the leader, the number of people reporting to the leader, the amount of time spent in touch with the leader per week before and during the covid-19 pandemic, and finally the likelihood of recommending the leader as someone to work with (on a scale from 1 to 10). The last question allowed for identifying the leaders' promoters, detractors and neutrals (Thomson, 2012) according to the Net Promoter Scale (Owen, 2019), which consists of a marketing indicator that has been widely used to measure customer or client satisfaction in relation to a product, a service or a brand. Since subordinates can be considered to be internal clients who are significantly affected by leadership service, both in terms of morale and engagement, with influence on productivity and performance, too, the Net Promoter Scale has been translated and adopted in this study in a perspective of beneficial contamination to stimulate reflection.

The second part of the survey was developed by the authors based on Richard E. Boyatzis' clusters of competencies (2009) including: 5 competencies of emotional intelligence, 7 competencies of social intelligence and 2 competencies of cognitive intelligence. For each of the 14 competencies, two questions were made investigating, respectively, the leader's actual level and the leader's desired level of the competency, according to their subordinates' perspective, for a total of 28 questions. The aim was to understand which competencies the leader lacked and should have developed more to be considered a good leader by their subordinates.

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3.2 Sample

The present study was based on a cross-sectional design and used individuals as the unit of analysis. The cross-sectional design was introduced to ensure a variety of personal situations of respondents on which to build a reliable analysis.

The research considered convenience sampling (also known as Haphazard Sampling or Accidental Sampling), which is a type of nonprobability or nonrandom sampling. This sampling technique includes subjects from the target population who meet some "practical criteria, such as easy accessibility… or the willingness to participate" in the survey (Etikan et al., 2016) and was the only viable method because the population observed is very large and the researchers had limited resources. However, nonprobability sampling has important limitations related to the representativeness of the population.

Overall, 193 respondents completed the survey, but 5 answers were discarded for a lack of content validity. The final sample consisted of 188 respondents, almost equally distributed between males and females, with the majority (71.8%) aged under 40 years old. The job positions identified in the sample were categorized into blue collar workers, office workers (43.6%), middle managers (36.7%), top managers, and finally trainers, professors and researchers. The functional areas that emerged in the sample were diverse, with most of the respondents employed in administrative and management functions (34.6%) and in the marketing, sales and after-sales services (30.9%). Regarding the company industry sector, the statistical classification of economic activities in the European Community (NACE) was adopted and manufacturing (or similar) prevailed (55.8% respondents) over services (44.2% respondents). The respondents' length of service proved to be quite short, as 52.1% had been working for their company for less than 5 years. In terms of company size, the sample was heterogeneous, comprising small and medium as well as large companies and multinationals. With respect to the relationship between the leader and their subordinates, 65.5% had been reporting to their leader for a period between 1 and 10 years; 56.9% of their leaders supervised 3 to 10 people; and after the outbreak of covid-19, the amount of time spent in touch with the leader was reduced in general.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

To reach as much professional as possible, the link to the web-based survey was publicly shared on two main social media platforms (i.e., Linkedin and Facebook) to reach a diverse target audience on a voluntary basis. In addition, the survey was sent via email to some companies' managers and senior managers working for diverse Italian companies to be shared among subordinates and completed on a voluntary basis.

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As it would not have been feasible to obtain a statistically significant sample of the Italian population of professionals, this implementation of the convenience sampling technique does assure us of an acceptable sample diversity that allows for identifying some preliminary and indicative results to be further investigated with future analyses, without drawing inferences about the population.

The survey was launched in June 2021 and concluded after four months, during the pandemic crisis, thus capturing respondents' burning feelings and emotions.

Before the completion of the survey, the research purpose was clearly explained and confidentiality was guaranteed to all participants, asking for honest responses. The method allowed for the electronic collection of data ensuring the correctness of data entry and integration while reducing the time needed to do so.

The web-based survey administered through the two social media outlets allowed for reaching out and soliciting people who were sensitive to the topic and willing to cooperate honestly. Hence, the quality of the evidence collected is appreciable, despite having only a single data entry-point.

First, some initial analyses were carried out through tables of statistics (i.e., pivot tables), with the aim of gaining an overview of participants' responses. Then, further statistical analyses (i.e., factor analysis, correlations and linear regression) were performed using SPSS software.

4. Results

4.1 Basic statistics on the survey results

In Table 2 below, the mean for actual and desired competencies was calculated, indicating respectively the level of competency actually found in leaders and the desirability of encountering the same competency more often (on a scale from 1 to 5), according to subordinates.

Regarding actual competencies, high mean values indicated areas where leaders performed quite well, while low mean values suggested areas for improvement. The leaders studied scored high in their abilities to recognize self-emotions and keep impulses in check, in their achievement orientation to meet excellence, in their tactics of persuasion and negotiations to resolve disagreements, and, finally, in the inference and perception of causal relations; they scored average in their attentiveness towards others' feelings, perspectives and concerns, in the awareness of the group's emotional states and in the empowering of relationships, in the role of guiding and inspiring, both at the individual and group level, and in the bolstering of subordinates' abilities and development needs. Regarding desired competencies, those resulting more appealing for a leader to possess came out to be empathy, organizational awareness, coaching and mentoring and inspirational leadership.

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Table n. 2 - Mean for actual and desired competencies

Leader's competencies	Actual competency mean	Desired competency mean
Emotional self- awareness	**3.8**	2.8
Emotional self-control	**4**	2.5
Adaptability	3.3	3.3
Optimism	3.4	3.4
Achievement orientation	**4**	2.7
Positive outlook	3.4	3.4
Empathy	3.1	**3.7**
Organizational awareness	2.9	**3.6**
Coaching and mentoring	3.3	**3.7**
Inspirational leadership	3.2	**3.6**
Persuasion	**3.8**	2.6
Conflict management	**3.9**	2.7
Teamwork	3.4	3.4
System thinking	**3.7**	2.8
Pattern recognition	3.3	3.3

Source: our elaboration

Moreover, prior to the main analyses, based on the score given to the Net Promoter Scale question related to likelihood of recommending their leader as someone to work with (Owen, 2019), respondents were categorized in promoters (i.e., giving a score of 9 or 10 to their leader), neutrals (i.e., giving a score of 7 or 8 to their leader) and detractors (i.e., giving a score from 0 to 6 to their leader). Promoters represented 22.9% of respondents, neutrals 55.3% and detractors 21.8%.

4.2 Factor analysis

Two separate factor analyses were conducted in order to assess how subordinates in the sample actually perceived leaders' competencies and how they would have

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liked to perceive them with respect to the adopted framework developed by Boyatzis (2009).

With regard to the investigation of leaders' actual competencies (Table 3 below), the components that emerged were clustered in the following:

- guidance towards the achievement of goals;
- management of emotions;
- logical thinking.

Table n. 3 - Matrix of rotated components for actual competencies

	Component		
	1	2	3
SI-1 Understands one's feelings and concerns	.836		
SI_3 Encourages relationships	.825		
EI_9 Is positive	.805		
SI_5 Recognizes one's development needs	.722		
EI_5 Is flexible in handling change	.680		
SI_7 Inspires and guides	.670		
SI_13 Is team-oriented	.593		
EI_3 Controls impulses		.822	
EI_1 Recognizes his / her emotions		.740	
SI-11 Resolves disagreements		.737	
SI_9 Is a great persuader		.581	
CI_3 Identifies themes or patterns in random items, events or phenomena			.817
CI_1 Identifies multiple causal relationships in phenomena or events			.745

Extraction method: Analysis of principal components
Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization
Convergence for rotation executed in 5 iterations

Source: our elaboration

The first cluster of actual competencies, guidance towards the achievement of goals, was the largest component made up of the following competencies: optimism about the future, flexibility in handling change, continuous improvement to meet excellence, inspiration and guidance, attentiveness towards others' feelings, perspectives and concerns, recognition of their development needs and bolstering of their abilities, team building and encouragement of relationships. The second cluster, management of emotions, included: recognition of one's own emotions and their effects, control of disruptive emotions and impulses, resolution of conflicts and disagreements, and persuasion. The third cluster, logical thinking, consisted of the abilities to identify multiple causal relationships in understanding phenomena or events and to perceive themes or patterns in seemingly random items, events, or phenomena.

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Overall, the leadership competencies emerging from this first analysis were related to rationalizing reality by acting with logical thinking and by dominating conflicting emotions in order to guide subordinates towards the achievement of organizational goals.

When investigating the desired competencies, namely the competencies that leaders should possess from their subordinates' perspective (Table 4 below), the components that emerged were clustered in the following:

1) caring;
2) peaceful environment.

Table n. 4 - Matrix of rotated components for desired competencies

	Component	
	1	2
SI_2 Should understand one's feelings and concerns	.853	
SI_4 Should encourage relationships	.826	
SI_6 Should recognize one's development needs	.784	
SI_14 Should be team-oriented	.747	
CI_4 Should identify themes or patterns in random items, events or phenomena	.730	
SI_8 Should inspire and guide	.677	
EI_6 Should be flexible in handling change		.713
EI_10 Should be positive		.794
EI_4 Should control impulses		.814
SI_10 Should be a great persuader		.781
SI_12 Should resolve disagreements		.779
EI_2 Should recognize his / her emotions		.768
CI_2 Should identify multiple causal relationships in phenomena or events		.709
EI_8 Should strive to meet excellence		.560

Extraction method: Analysis of principal components
Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization
Convergence for rotation executed in 5 iterations [1]

Source: our elaboration

The first cluster of desired competencies, namely caring, involved the ability to motivate and guide followers with a sense of purpose beyond day-to-day tasks, to listen attentively to understand others' perspectives and adopt supportive behaviors, to help followers increase their skills and develop their full potential, create group synergy and power relationships, and identify themes or patterns in seemingly random items, events, or phenomena. The second cluster, related to the creation of a

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[1] The item "achievement orientation" loaded nearly equally across all three factors identified, leading to its removal. This could be attributed to a potential misinterpretation of the question, which may have been overly general.

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converging and peaceful environment, demanded the ability to convey reliability and
provide a positive and adaptive vision of the future, to influence people towards the
accomplishment of objectives, to increase efficiency and improve performance, to
resolve disagreements and help develop effective collaboration, to sense inner signals
and their effects on other people, to have emotional self-control to preserve a peaceful
environment, and to perceive multiple causal relationships in understanding
phenomena or events. The leadership competencies that emerged from this second
analysis were more related to adjusting to the complex and fast-changing reality by
setting up favorable conditions to work, while comforting employees in the face of a
world of uncertainties.

4.3 Reliability statistics

After performing two factor analyses for leaders' actual and desired competencies,
reliability statistics were conducted for each component obtained to make sure that
the outcomes were significant and consistent.
The first two components of actual competencies, namely guidance towards the
achievement of goals and management of emotions, turn out to be highly significant,
with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.821 and 0.73. The same can be observed for the first two
components of desired competencies, namely mentoring, coaching and caring and the
creation of a converging and peaceful environment, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.874
and 0.852 (Table 5 below). Finally, the Cronbach's Alpha of the third component of
actual competencies, namely logical thinking, was somehow less significant, but still
acceptable, with a value of 0.661 (Table 5 below).

Table n. 5 - Reliability statistics of components

	Cronbach's Alpha	N. of elements
Guidance towards goals' achievement	.821	7
Management of emotions	.730	4
Logical thinking	.661	2
Mentoring, coaching and caring	.874	8
Creation of a converging and peaceful environment	.852	6

**. The correlation is significant at level 0.01 (two tails).
*. The correlation is significant at level 0.05 (two tails).

Source: our elaboration

This allowed for moving the analysis forward and performing a linear regression
with the factors that emerged, to understand if and how they contributed to
explaining the level of followers' engagement and enthusiasm towards their boss.

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4.4 Linear regression

To understand if and how the factors emerged from the previous analysis contributed to explaining the level of followers' engagement and enthusiasm towards their boss, two linear regressions were performed.

The first linear regression was limited to the control variables, to assess which of them were relevant for the purpose of the study. No control variable emerged as significant in the model; therefore, the results of the study were not influenced by factors such as the respondents' age, gender, job position, and length of service or the size and the industry of the company they worked in.

The second linear regression was performed taking, as dependent variable, the Net Promoter Scale referring to the leader (i.e., the subordinates' likelihood of recommending their leader as someone to work with through a ten-point scale), as independent variables, the five factors emerged in the factor analysis and, as control variables, five out of the nine variables investigated in the survey (i.e., subordinates' age, gender, job position, length of service, company size). The selection of control variables was made by the authors based on the relevant literature on statistically controlled variables for the study of leadership (Bernerth et al, 2017).

Table 6 below shows the correlations among the variables employed for the second linear regression.

Table n. 6 - Correlations of the linear regression

	Mean	STD dev.	Ment. coaching and caring	Creation of a conv. and peac. env.	Manag. of emot.	Logical think.	Guid. towards goals achiev.	Empl. engag. towards the leader
Mentoring, coaching and caring	3.5146	1.00672	1	.396**	-.129	-.297**	-.715**	-.545**
Creation of a converging and peaceful environment	2.6924	.94819	---	1	-.580**	-.259**	-.174*	-.326**
Management of emotions	3.794	.6791	---	---	1	.376**	.288**	.502**
Logical thinking	3.519	.8518	---	---	---	1	.335**	.395**
Guidance towards goals achievement	3.2454	.77981	---	---	---	---	1	.654**
Employee engagement towards the leader	7.42	1.495	---	---	---	---	---	1

**. The correlation is significant at level 0.01 (two tails).
*. The correlation is significant at level 0.05 (two tails).
Source: our elaboration

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The adjusted R-squared value proved to be 0.553. The proposed model accounted, therefore, for 55% of the variance in subordinates' likelihood of recommending the leader.

As emerged from table 6 above, only the three factors grouping actual competencies (management of emotions, guidance towards the achievement of goals and logical thinking) are positively correlated with the dependent variable (employee engagement towards the leader, i.e., the Net Promoter Scale). On the contrary, the two clusters of desired competencies are negatively correlated with the Net Promoter Scale. This is a very interesting result suggesting that only the competencies related to rationality, guidance and reduction of uncertainties are appreciated by the sample of respondents, who expect their leaders to be able to filter out the clutter and establish order in a context of crisis. The desired competencies, however, are wishful thinking that reveal the fatigue of a prolonged crisis situation, but they are not considered essential components of a good and inspiring leadership. These results are coherent with previous studies on the nature of managerial work (Stoker et al., 2019; Garretsen et al. 2022; Mintzberg, 1973).

Table 7 below reports coefficients of the linear regressions and their significance. In model 1, which includes control variables only, no variable came out to be significant, meaning that the results of the survey were not influenced by factors such as the respondents' age, gender, job position, and length of service or the size and industry of the company they worked in. In model 2, the factors that emerged to significantly explain the construct of employee engagement towards the leader were guidance towards the achievement of goals (0.380), management of emotions (0.409) and logical thinking (0.66).

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Table n. 7 - Coefficients of the linear regression

	Standardized coefficients	
	Model 1	Model 2
Blue collars	-.105	-.070
Office workers	-.173	-.132
Middle managers	-.168	-.229
Top managers	-.079	-.153
Aged up to 29	-.017	.063
Aged 30-40	-.033	.034
Aged 41-50	-.011	.092
Males	.054	.066
No other reporting	.057	-.085
1-5 people reporting	.125	.032
6-20 people reporting	.083	.050
0-1year reporting	-.029	.046
1-5 years reporting	.036	.068
5-10 years reporting	-.052	.083
Mentoring, coaching and caring		-.263
Creation of a converging and peaceful environment		.113
Guidance towards goals achievement		.380
Management of emotions		.409
Logical thinking		0.66

Source: our elaboration

The corresponding VIF (i.e., variance inflation factor) for the predictor constructs were below the suggested value of 5 (Hair et al., 2017), meaning that there was no collinearity among significant variables.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The historic challenge for leaders is to manage the crisis while building the future (Kissinger, 2020). The advent of the VUCA world has created a climate of uncertainty and volatility, which has been further increased by the covid-19 pandemic. Relying on traditional notions such as charismatic, top-down and authoritative leadership may not be useful; leadership behaviors must be revised in light of new organizational

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models. The literature indicates that a high level of alignment between leaders' expected competencies and actual competencies lead to subordinates' high degree of satisfaction towards their supervisor (Tsai & Qiao, 2023). In circumstances of complexity, it is therefore more imperative than ever to make sure that what leaders do and how they act is aligned with what is expected by their subordinates in order to co-create a supportive and participative leadership style, combining the acts of leaders and followers (Dirani et al., 2020).

The present study focuses on the leaders' competencies desired by employees at work to perform at their best in the complex and uncertain scenario brought about by the pandemic, where the introduction of remote or hybrid work has strongly impacted the leader-follower dynamics. When investigating the perceptions of this sample of subordinates about their leaders, it emerged that, compared to what was expected from the literature, there was an evolution in both leaders' actual and desired competencies. In particular, the leader's guidance attitude towards the achievement of goals, as well as the abilities to manage self and others' emotions to avoid a negative climate and reduce uncertainties were valued by followers as extremely important in fueling engagement. However, as the caring attitude of the leader increased, the level of employee engagement seemed to decrease. This may be explained by the fact that the sample included many millennials and post-millennials who do not want their leader to motivate them beyond the purpose of daily tasks but rather try to find the meaningful purpose of the job by themselves. What clearly emerged was the employees' expectation of encountering guidance and rationality in their leader, who is requested to sort through the conflicting emotions and chaos of the VUCA world, aggravated by a crisis, and transform it into a predictable and rational setting, leaving the right degree of autonomy in the achievement of organizational goals. All the factors representing a counterbalance to the volatile, uncertain and unpredictable environment exacerbated by the pandemic (e.g., the need for protection, support, advice, etc.) ended up being negatively correlated with engagement, as they go against the leader's strategic plan and enhance the insecurity related to the human factor. This evidence was confirmed by the "logical thinking" factor that, although less significant, emerged as correlated with two other significant factors in Table 6 (guidance towards goals' achievement, and employee engagement towards the leader).

The results of this study provide a small but relevant advancement to the extant literature as they highlight how the influence of the external environment interacts with the elaboration of the expectations on the part of the employees, in a "contingency" perspective. The vision confirms the "transformational" role of the leader (Bass et al., 2005) through a strong vision and positive expectations for the future, as well as the ability to create the conditions for enhancing employees' self-confidence in achieving the organizational goals.

This article, although based on a convenience sample that does not allow for generalizations, contributes to fueling the literature on emotion management in crisis contexts (Wu et al., 2021) by suggesting that in critical situations leaders are expected to restore order in a complex and uncertain reality, instilling trust in collaborators through a guidance attitude, and at the same time manage self and others' emotions

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to foster a positive climate, through the recognition of emotions, impulse control and the resolution of disagreements. The study is placed within a particular culture and a specific type of crisis, i.e. an unexpected external shock, and therefore it is not possible to extend the results to other situations. However, despite its limitations, the study is a stimulus for further in-depth studies that take into account the influence of local culture on the actual and desired skills of the leader and that allow comparisons to be made with crisis situations of different nature. The exploratory nature of the study implied a series of limitations that can be addressed by future research. First, this paper leveraged on a theoretical framework on leadership competencies developed by Boyatzis in 2009, which is not specific to a crisis nor to the covid-19 pandemic. In future research, similar studies may be conducted by adopting theoretical frameworks developed in the emergent literature of pandemic or crisis leadership. Second, since a quantitative methodology was adopted to identify the leaders' competencies fueling or hindering engagement, a qualitative approach might be used in future studies to deepen or challenge the results obtained. Third, the study leveraged on a sample that is quite limited in numerical terms and is not representative of the Italian context, suggesting that the same research approach could be applied to a more representative sample. Fourth, national culture has a role in influencing leadership traits and behaviors as well as followers' perceptions, implying that similar studies conducted in other cultural, political and economic contexts may lead to different outputs. Finally, there might be more appropriate measures of the construct of employee engagement, representing the dependent variable, which was measured in this study through a single question posed to subordinates, investigating their willingness to recommend their leader as someone to work.

The findings of the present research have some theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical standpoint, the outputs emerged highlighted a framework which is different from that developed by Boyatzis in 2009 and adopted for the purpose of the study. This means that covid-19 might represents a breaking point with the past, marking the beginning of an unpreceded crisis that has to be addressed with specific literature on pandemic leadership (Stoker et al., 2019; Garretsen et al., 2022). From a practical standpoint, what emerged is that organizational leaders should focus particularly on managing both their own and others' emotions to preserve a favorable environment and increase effective collaboration, taking on the role of guidance towards the accomplishment of goals. They should, however, avoid being overly supportive and leave the right degree of autonomy to their subordinates to enable them to find the meaningful purpose of their job on their own. Overall, during a crisis such as covid-19, leaders are not expected to simply adjust to the emergency context and reassure their followers; they are requested to transform the world into a rational and intelligible setting by managing conflicting emotions and reducing uncertainties. These represent some interesting hints on leadership competencies in relation to employee engagement to be further addressed by future studies.

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