Leadership Styles and Burnout in SMEs: Employees' Perceptions and Organizational Implications

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Abstract: Leadership is currently understood as a form of influence within interpersonal relationships, playing a crucial role in organizational functioning and employee well-being. This article reports an exploratory, qualitative-led mixed-methods study of employees' perceptions of the relationship between leadership styles and burnout in Portuguese micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), a context still little explored in the national literature. A questionnaire survey based on the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire and the Maslach Burnout Inventory provided descriptive, contextualizing data, while semi-structured interviews, analysed through thematic content analysis, constituted the primary source of evidence. The final sample comprised forty-five employees from six Portuguese SMEs, twenty-eight of whom answered the questionnaire and seventeen took part in the interviews; given its small, non-probabilistic size, the sample does not support statistical generalization or formal hypothesis testing. The findings suggest that, in employees' perception, organizational leadership style is associated with the emergence of burnout. Transformational leadership was the most frequently perceived style, present in all companies studied, but its apparent effectiveness depends on being balanced with other styles: laissez-faire leadership was most often associated with reduced personal and professional accomplishment, while transactional leadership, when resting on excessive pressure to meet goals, was associated with higher emotional exhaustion. Transformational leadership itself, when unbalanced and unsupported, may paradoxically accompany burnout. Emotional exhaustion emerged as the dimension most frequently reported. Rather than confirmatory conclusions, these exploratory findings are offered as propositions for future research with larger, representative samples and inferential statistical methods, and suggest that promoting balanced leadership styles may help reduce burnout risk and foster healthier SME work environments.

Keywords: Leadership, Burnout, Leadership styles, Emotional exhaustion, Small And medium-sized enterprises, Exploratory study, Human resources

1. Introduction

Leadership is currently understood as the driving force of any organization, being largely responsible for the existence and success of what is termed an “organization” (Teixeira, 2013). The way a leader acts has direct repercussions not only on organizational performance but also on cross-cutting domains, namely employee well-being. Given today’s organizational challenges, leadership has gained prominence, requiring leaders to combine technical, emotional and social skills (Dimitriadis & Psychogios, 2021).

At the same time, burnout syndrome has established itself as one of today’s most significant psychosocial occupational hazards, being regarded as a serious process of deterioration in workers’ quality of life, with major implications for physical and mental health (Pêgo & Pêgo, 2016). Knowing that an unsatisfactory leadership style is one of the determining factors in the emergence of burnout (Lourenço et al., 2020), this article proceeds from the premise that understanding this relationship is essential to promoting healthier work environments.

The choice to study this relationship in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is justified for two reasons. First, in these organizations the proximity between leaders and teams is generally greater. Second, SMEs make up 99.9% of Portuguese companies and employ 78.1% of workers (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2014), making organizational leadership in these contexts particularly relevant. The Portuguese literature on leadership and burnout, however, tends to concentrate on specific professions and larger organizations, leaving a gap regarding the smaller-scale business fabric SMEs represent.

Given the limited empirical evidence on this relationship in SMEs, this article adopts an explicitly exploratory stance: rather than testing pre-specified hypotheses within a statistically powered design, it seeks to surface, describe and interpret employees’ perceptions of how leadership styles relate to burnout, aiming to generate propositions for more rigorous, larger-scale research. Its main aim is to explore employees’ perception, in SMEs, of the effect of leadership styles on burnout, guided by the question: is organizational leadership style perceived

by employees as associated with burnout? The specific objectives are: (1) to identify the leadership styles perceived in the selected SMEs; (2) to identify leaders' behaviours that employees associate with professional burnout; and (3) to understand which burnout dimensions are most experienced. Given the exploratory, predominantly qualitative nature of the evidence, the results below should be read as indicative patterns, not confirmed, generalizable findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Leadership

Leadership is one of the most widely studied areas in Management and, at the same time, one of those that generates the least consensus due to its enormous complexity (Bilhim, 2013). Over time, the concept has evolved from trait theory and behavioural theories to situational and contingency approaches and, more recently, to the transformational, transactional and charismatic perspectives (Silva, 2003).

Yukl (1998) defines leadership as a process through which a member of a group influences the other members' interpretation of events, the choice of objectives and strategies, and the motivation and cooperation of the group. Teixeira (2013, p.219) similarly defines it as "the process of influencing others so that they do what the leader wants to be done". Leadership is thus not a fixed trait but an interactive process in which the leader affects, and is affected by, followers (Northouse, 2021).

This study adopts the model of Avolio and Bass (2004), which distinguishes transformational leadership (grounded in charisma, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration), transactional leadership (based on contingent reward and active management by exception) and passive leadership (passive management by exception and laissez-faire) (Franco & Matos, 2013). Transformational leaders are seen as visionary and caring, encouraging employees toward extraordinary goals and positive emotions (Abelha et al., 2018; Bass, 1997), whereas laissez-faire leadership is marked by a lack of guidance and active involvement, creating uncertainty and lack of direction (Teixeira, 2013).

The charisma underlying transformational leadership has itself been extensively theorized. Klein and House (1995) propose that it emerges from the interaction of a "spark" (the leader's charismatic traits), "flammable material" (receptive followers) and "oxygen" (a conducive organizational climate), with all three required for charismatic leadership to take hold. This is consistent with Robbins and Judge's (2013) finding of a positive association between charismatic leadership and employee performance and satisfaction, and suggests that charisma alone is not sufficient to produce positive outcomes — a nuance taken up later when interpreting this study's more mixed findings.

More recent work disaggregates transformational leadership into its sub-dimensions: Deinert et al. (2015) show these are differentially linked to leaders' personality and to distinct performance outcomes, suggesting that treating the construct as a single, undifferentiated whole — as in smaller-scale studies, including this one — may obscure important internal variation, a limitation revisited in the discussion.

2.2 Burnout

Burnout syndrome is defined by Loureiro et al. (2008, p.33) as "a process of response to chronic work-related stress, in which the main manifestations are emotional and physical exhaustion, cynicism and reduced professional efficacy". Coined by Freudenberger in the 1970s, the term evokes the image of "burning out" (Marôco et al., 2016). Maslach and Jackson (1981) later developed the widely used Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), identifying three core dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal and professional accomplishment.

Emotional exhaustion, the central and most evident dimension, reflects a progressive depletion of mental and physical energy (Maslach et al., 2001); depersonalization involves distancing, cynicism and loss of empathy towards colleagues; and reduced accomplishment stems from negative self-evaluation and a sense of incompetence (Areosa & Queirós, 2020). Its causes are multifactorial — work overload, lack of control, an unfavourable environment and lack of emotional support, sometimes compounded by personal traits such as perfectionism (Rehman et al., 2015) — with consequences including poorer health, lower organizational commitment and higher turnover intention (Leiter & Maslach, 1988).

2.3 Relationship Between Leadership and Burnout

The relationship between leadership styles and burnout is a crucial area within the organizational context. Harms et al. (2017) note that stress and leadership are closely linked, with both consistently associated with reduced

performance and job satisfaction. Authoritarian leaders, who impose excessive control and limit autonomy, tend to create more stressful environments and contribute to burnout, whereas participative leaders attentive to well-being tend to minimize this risk (Teixeira, 2013).

Recent studies show a strong association between leadership and burnout (Harms et al., 2017; Lourenço et al., 2020; Taube & Carlotto, 2022; Costa & Fonseca, 2023). Taube and Carlotto (2022) found that negative burnout correlations centre on the leader's role and style, while Costa and Fonseca (2023) identify laissez-faire and autocratic leadership as the main causes of workplace burnout; Inceoglu et al. (2018) similarly report a significant impact of leadership style on employees' behaviour, performance and well-being.

This evidence has continued to grow. Neves et al. (2014) show that employees' perception of organizational support — largely mediated by their direct leader — is a determining factor in burnout, pointing to perceived leadership behaviour as the proximate mechanism. In a nursing-focused scoping review, Loureiro et al. (2021) likewise find leadership style consistently implicated in burnout, while noting that the evidence remains sector-specific and rarely extends to smaller organizations. More recent Portuguese studies reinforce this: Sevilha and Gallucci (2023) link ineffective leadership to burnout; Lopes (2022) associates authentic leadership with employees' stress, burnout and performance; and Gomes (2023), studying a large Portuguese retail chain, shows the leadership–well-being relationship also holding in a commercial setting closer to several of the SMEs studied here. This contemporary literature nonetheless remains concentrated in large organizations, specific professions or single-case studies, rarely addressing the diversified, resource-constrained SMEs that dominate the Portuguese economy, which is the identified gap this exploratory study begins to address.

2.4 Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

SMEs are characterized by a simple organizational structure, proximity to market and customers, and fewer than 250 employees (Melo & Machado, 2015; 2020). They represent 99.9% of Portuguese companies, employ 78.1% of workers and generate 57.6% of national turnover (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2014), making them the engine of the Portuguese and European economies. Work-related strain and degraded working conditions have themselves been identified as a multidimensional, cross-sectoral phenomenon in the Portuguese labour market (Varela et al., 2020), reinforcing the relevance of examining how such strain, including burnout, unfolds within the SME segment that so heavily shapes it. Their simple structure and leader–employee proximity make this context particularly relevant for studying the leadership–burnout relationship, which remains little explored here.

3. Methodology

This research aims to explore employees' perception, in SMEs, of the relationship between leadership styles and burnout. Five exploratory questions were formulated to orient data collection and analysis — not as hypotheses for statistical confirmation, but as guides for interpretation: EQ1, whether perceived leadership style is associated with burnout; EQ2, whether autocratic and laissez-faire styles are associated with the syndrome; EQ3, whether charismatic leadership is associated with employee satisfaction; EQ4, whether transformational leadership is associated with performance and well-being; and EQ5, whether higher burnout is associated with reduced performance and satisfaction. Given the small, non-probabilistic sample described below, these questions were explored descriptively and interpretively rather than tested inferentially.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted for its integrative and complementary potential (Filho et al., 2018). Because of the low response rate in the quantitative stage, the design functioned, in practice, as a qualitative-led study: the questionnaire provides descriptive, contextualizing data, while the semi-structured interviews, analysed through thematic content analysis, constitute the primary evidence. The questionnaire, administered via Google Forms, was distributed by e-mail between May and August to employees of Portuguese SMEs of different sizes and sectors; response numbers rose slowly — around ten after two months, twenty after renewed outreach, and twenty-eight by closing — prompting the addition of a qualitative interview stage, conducted in person and online between July and August. Both samples were obtained through convenience and availability sampling among SMEs that agreed to participate, and are therefore non-probabilistic.

The questionnaire covers three parts: sociodemographic and professional characterization, perception of leadership style, and perception of burnout. Leadership styles were measured with the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) of Avolio and Bass (2004) — thirty-six items across seven scales (charisma, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, contingent reward, active and passive management by exception, and laissez-faire), rated on a five-point scale. Burnout was measured with the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) of

Maslach and Jackson (1981), in the Portuguese adaptation by Melo et al. (1999) — nineteen items across emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment, rated on a seven-point scale. Interviews followed a structured script based on the same dimensions, and were recorded, transcribed and subjected to thematic-matrix content analysis, this study's principal analytical method.

The final sample comprised forty-five employees from six Portuguese SMEs (Company A to F) in sectors such as management consulting, automotive trade and repair, engineering, embroidery and physiotherapy, with eight to forty-two employees each. Twenty-eight answered the questionnaire and seventeen took part in interviews, across four of the six companies. Data collection ran from May to August, with confidentiality and anonymity ensured throughout. Leadership style is treated as the variable of interest and burnout as the outcome of interest; given the exploratory, non-probabilistic design, this relationship is interpreted descriptively rather than through formal statistical inference.

4. Results

From the quantitative analysis (n = 28), descriptive statistics indicate that 71% of participants were female (Figure 1), 54% were single, and most were aged 20–29. The large majority (82%) held a permanent contract and worked 40 hours per week, mostly in administrative roles. These figures describe this specific, non-probabilistic sample and do not characterize the broader population of SME employees in Portugal.

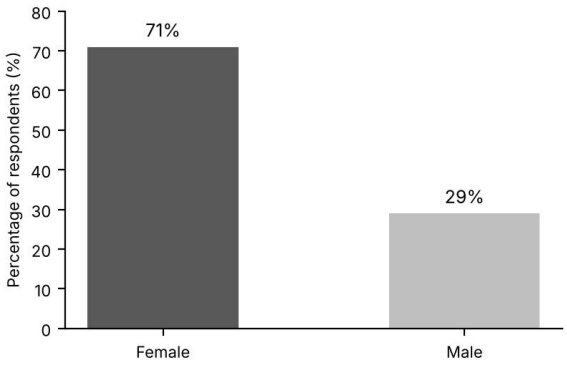


Figure 1: Gender distribution of the questionnaire survey sample (n = 28; descriptive data, non-probabilistic sample)

Regarding leadership, the MLQ results showed the simultaneous presence of transformational, transactional and laissez-faire traits, as perceived by respondents. Positive responses stood out on charisma items such as "talks optimistically about the future" (39.3% "frequently") and "prioritizes the group's interests" (50% "frequently"), suggesting charismatic leadership in several respondents' perception. Transactional behaviours were also identified, particularly around defining responsibilities and recognizing goal achievement. However, a relevant set of responses also revealed laissez-faire traits — "only intervenes when errors occur" and "is slow to respond to urgent questions raised" — a pattern worth noting, given this style's elsewhere-documented association with burnout (Section 2.3).

On the MBI, 35.7% of respondents felt emotionally unfulfilled "a few times a month" and 28.6% reported feeling burned out with the same frequency, pointing to relevant emotional exhaustion in this sample. Conversely, most respondents (78.6%) never treated colleagues as "impersonal objects", indicating low depersonalization overall, though a minority (14.3%) acknowledged it occasionally.

In the qualitative analysis — this study's primary analytical component — with seventeen interviewees from four companies (B, D, E and F), transformational leadership was perceived by all interviewees, mainly through charisma and intellectual stimulation. Table 1 summarizes the leadership styles and burnout dimensions identified, by company.

Table 1: Leadership styles and burnout dimensions identified in the interviews, by company (descriptive counts from thematic content analysis, n = 17)

Company	n	Transformational	Transactional	Laissez-faire	Emotional exhaustion	Deperson-alization	Reduced accomplishment
Company B	4	4	2	0	2	0	1
Company D	4	4	2	3	3	0	2
Company E	5	5	4	0	3	2	1
Company F	4	4	2	2	3	1	0
Total	17	17	10	5	11	3	4

Source: own elaboration, based on the interviews' content analysis matrix.

As shown in Table 1, transactional leadership was perceived by ten of the seventeen interviewees, mainly linked to reward systems, while laissez-faire leadership was identified in five cases, concentrated in Companies D and F. Emotional exhaustion was the most frequently mentioned dimension (eleven of seventeen accounts), followed by reduced accomplishment (four cases) and depersonalization (three cases).

Employees' accounts illustrate this relationship. One employee from Company B described: "I don't know if I'd call it burnout, but almost — if it wasn't, it was close (…) working at that time was a real effort (…) I felt worn down". Another, from Company D, reported losing enthusiasm: "now I no longer have that enthusiasm and motivation to come to work", linking this to a lack of communication and recognition — characteristics of the laissez-faire style. Even so, some cases of well-balanced transformational leadership were not associated with any reported symptom of burnout.

5. Discussion of Results

Because this study follows an exploratory, qualitative-led design based on a small, non-probabilistic sample, the patterns discussed below in relation to the five exploratory questions (EQ1–EQ5) are indicative tendencies, not confirmed or statistically tested conclusions — propositions for further research rather than generalizable findings.

On EQ1, both strands point the same way: perceived leadership style appears associated with burnout, consistent with Inceoglu et al. (2018) and Harms et al. (2017).

On EQ2, the data are broadly consistent with autocratic and laissez-faire styles being associated with higher reported burnout, in line with Costa and Fonseca (2023). In the interviews, centralized decision-making combined with a lack of clear guidance appeared, in employees' own accounts, to accompany more pronounced emotional and physical fatigue and a growing sense of unfulfillment — again, self-reported rather than objectively measured.

EQ3, on charismatic leadership and satisfaction, finds similarly consistent support: charisma items obtained overall positive responses, and interviewees valued effective communication, trust and inspiring vision, echoing Robbins and Judge (2013). Read through Klein and House's (1995) "spark–fuel–oxygen" model, this suggests that a charismatic leader, receptive employees and a supportive climate coexisted in at least some companies studied — though the data cannot establish which element was decisive.

EQ4, on transformational leadership and performance/well-being, receives only partial, more complex support. Although the literature broadly reports a positive effect (Abelha et al., 2018; Bass, 1997), this study suggests that when transformational leadership is perceived as exercised alongside other styles, such as transactional or laissez-faire, without balance, it can coexist with — and in some accounts accompany — burnout. Consistent with Deinert et al.'s (2015) finding that the construct's sub-dimensions relate differently to performance, this may reflect uneven effects across facets: inspirational communication may support well-being while high, unsupported expectations generate overload instead of motivation.

Finally, EQ5 — higher burnout associated with reduced performance and satisfaction — also finds support: reports of exhaustion and loss of interest accompanied expressions of lower motivation, echoing Leiter and Maslach (1988) and Caetano (2024). This aligns with Neves et al.'s (2014) finding that perceived organizational support — largely channelled through the direct leader in small firms — is a determinant of burnout, and with the broader pattern in Loureiro et al. (2021), Sevilha and Gallucci (2023), Lopes (2022) and Gomes (2023) across nursing, retail and other Portuguese settings. Overall, these exploratory findings are compatible with emotional exhaustion being the most salient burnout dimension in the SMEs studied — explained less by an absence of positive transformational traits than by pressure to meet goals (transactional) and lack of direction and support (laissez-faire), which appear to accompany exhaustion even alongside transformational traits.

6. Conclusion

This exploratory study sought to surface and interpret Portuguese SME employees' perceptions of the leadership–burnout relationship, opening a line of inquiry largely absent from a national literature usually centred on other sectors and larger organizations. Rather than confirming hypotheses, the findings offer indicative patterns and propositions: in employees' own perception, organizational leadership style appears associated with the emergence of burnout.

Transformational leadership was the most consistently perceived style, but its apparent effectiveness depends on balance: well applied, it seems to accompany a healthier culture; paired with excessive expectations, overload or lack of support, it may paradoxically coexist with burnout. Laissez-faire leadership was most often linked to reduced accomplishment, while transactional leadership showed a dual character — positive with clear rewards, negative under excessive pressure. Emotional exhaustion emerged as the most frequently reported burnout dimension.

This study's contribution is deliberately modest and exploratory. It does not claim causal or statistically generalizable relationships; rather, it offers an initial, qualitatively grounded account of how employees in an understudied segment of the Portuguese economy — SMEs — perceive this relationship, surfacing propositions for future, larger-scale testing. Its contribution to academic debate lies less in confirming existing theory than in grounding, with first-hand qualitative evidence from a previously unstudied context, testable propositions extending the leadership–burnout literature beyond the professions and large organizations where it has concentrated. The interviews also revealed that many employees have little awareness of the concept of burnout, underscoring the value of organizational awareness-raising and early recognition — a practical implication independent of the study's exploratory status.

Several limitations should be weighed. The sample is small and non-probabilistic, drawn from six SMEs that agreed to participate, reflecting both the difficulty of recruiting companies and the topic's sensitivity, which led some to decline; findings cannot be statistically generalized. The quantitative component (n = 28) was treated descriptively only — no inferential tests were applied, and conclusions should be read as propositions, not confirmed effects. Questionnaire length may also have affected response quality and contributed to the low response rate that pushed the study toward the qualitative interviews. Finally, both leadership style and burnout were assessed through self-reported perceptions rather than independent or longitudinal measures, which may be subject to common-method bias and retrospective reconstruction.

Future research should replicate this study with larger, probabilistically sampled SME populations, large enough to support inferential analysis — such as correlation and regression modelling of MLQ and MBI dimensions — so these exploratory associations can be formally tested. Disaggregating transformational leadership into its sub-dimensions, following Deinert et al. (2015), would help clarify which behaviours drive positive outcomes and which contribute to burnout when unbalanced. A longitudinal design would help establish temporal precedence, which this cross-sectional study cannot. Finally, future work should explore moderating variables — organizational culture, sector, length of service — and extend comparison to other under-researched contexts, building on the propositions this study has sought to establish.

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Ethics Statement: This study ensured the anonymity and confidentiality of all participating companies and employees, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents and interviewees prior to data collection.

Given the organizational and low-risk nature of the research, formal ethics clearance from an institutional committee was not required, in line with the standards applicable to this type of study.

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