

“I THAT IS WE, WE THAT IS I”: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF WORK ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN KEY LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS AND VOLUNTEER SATISFACTION

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Leadership styles offer relevant clues to the challenging issue of managing volunteers. In particular, we assume that leaders encouraging a collective dimension — such as communal identity, recognition, and trust — among followers can improve positive outcomes. The study aims to analyze the relationship between two key leadership behaviors and volunteer satisfaction, hypothesizing a mediating role of work engagement. The hypothesized relations were tested by using structural equation models in a group of 195 Italian volunteers. Results show that the two key leadership behaviors studied are positively associated to work engagement, which, in turn, is positively related to volunteer satisfaction. The relationships between the antecedents and outcome are totally mediated by work engagement. We explain our findings through the job demands-resources (JD-R) model. Training programs for leaders can be implemented on the basis of this study to enhance volunteers' well-being.

Key words: Leadership in volunteering; Volunteer work engagement; Volunteer satisfaction; Volunteer well-being; JD-R model.

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The management of organizations of the third sector is recognized as being more complex than that of other organizations. Being neither governmental nor for-profit, nonprofit organizations (NPOs) strive to find the right balance between social functions and financial constraints (Toepler & Anheier, 2013).

In addition, they are accountable to a variety of stakeholders, such as paid workers, suppliers, donors, end-users and beneficiaries of their services, as well as volunteers (Balsler & McClusky, 2005; Benevene, Kong, Barbieri, Lucchesi, & Cortini, 2017; Benevene, Kong, Lucchesi, & Cortini, 2019; Kearns, 1996). Unlikely other types of organizations, in most NPOs volunteers are a crucial factor not only for the

delivery of services, but also for other tasks and activities, such as fund raising, administration, and organization of public events — to mention just a few (Anheier & Salamon, 2006; Benevene & Cortini, 2010).

The major role of volunteers makes managing NPOs more complex. Several authors underlined that managing volunteers and paid workers in NPOs requires more skills and more knowledge than managing paid staff only (Benevene, Kong, De Carlo, Lucchesi, & Cortini, 2018; Cunningham, 1999; Kong, 2003). Volunteers have been reported to have different job attitudes and organizational behaviors than paid employees, characterized by less formalization of responsibilities, more membership uncertainty, and less stable contact with co-workers (Pearce, 1993). In this regard, one of the main duties of managers is attracting and retaining the right volunteers in the organization, by providing them with training and increasing their participation rates and satisfaction to reciprocate their expectations (Barbieri, Farnese, Sulis, Dal Corso, & De Carlo, 2018; Hudson, 1995; Kim, Park, Kim, & Kim, 2019; Salamon, 2015; Salamon, Sokolowski, Megan, & Tice, 2013).

While job satisfaction is generally described as the way employees feel about the different aspects of their job (Spector, 1985), Vecina and colleagues identified volunteers' satisfaction as composed by three facets: 1) satisfaction with the motivation to volunteer, 2) satisfaction with the tasks performed, 3) satisfaction with the NPO in which the volunteer operates (Vecina, Chacón Fuertes, & Sueiro Abad, 2009). Consistently with the multidimensionality of the job satisfaction construct, Vecina and colleagues' definition of volunteer satisfaction takes into account whether and how people feel their values represented by the volunteering experience, whether they perceive their tasks as useful and impacting, and whether they feel recognized and valued by the organization. In a recent work, Benevene and colleagues showed that leaders' choices and conducts may have a positive impact on volunteers' satisfaction, thus increasing their affective commitment toward the organization and their intention to remain (Benevene, Dal Corso et al., 2018).

Volunteers' turnover is definitely one of the biggest challenges of NPO management. A large number of studies have showed that NPOs suffer from high rates of volunteer dropout (Anheier & Salamon, 2006; Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Nencini, Romaioli, & Meneghini, 2016). Quite surprisingly, the relationship among leadership styles, job satisfaction, and turnover intention has already been addressed in for-profit organizations, but it has been scarcely examined among NPOs (Benevene et al., 2017). In fact, it is well established in the literature that leadership styles have a strong influence on employees' job satisfaction, which, in turn, prevents employees' turnover. Moreover, job satisfaction is reported to have a big impact in reducing turnover rates not only among paid workers (Hellman, 1997; Park & Kim, 2009), but also among volunteers (Vecina, Chacón, Sueiro, & Barrón, 2012). Vecina and colleagues, in fact, showed that the stronger the satisfaction with the volunteering experience, the higher the likelihood to remain in the volunteering organization, especially for novice volunteers (Vecina et al., 2012).

Previous studies highlighted that transformational, ethical, and compassionate leadership styles had been frequently associated with higher job satisfaction (Gunther, Evans, Mefford, & Coe, 2007; Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Walumbwa et al., 2011; Wan Abdul Rahman & Castelli, 2013). Such leadership styles share some features, such as the attention toward employees' well-being and human growth, as well as encouragement of cooperation and teamwork (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). Several scholars showed that the higher the perceived well-being and cooperation, the higher the employees' job satisfaction (Griffin, Patterson, & West, 2001; Valle & Witt, 2001). Higher job satisfaction, in turn, increases the probability that workers will remain employed (Hellman, 1997; Mudor, Tooksoon, & Tak, 2011; Park & Kim, 2009). According to Lachman and Diamant, "most models describing the psychological process that leads to resignation or the intention to resign assume a sequence from the work environment, through employees' affective reactions to it, to the decision to remain or leave the organization"

(1987, p. 219). It is likely that leadership styles may affect workers' intention to stay in the same organization by means of job satisfaction (Long & Thean, 2011).

In spite of the paucity of studies carried out among NPOs, the construct of ethical leadership appears to fit in the management of these organizations, which are value-driven and people-centered. In fact, the construct of ethical leadership refers to the leaders' ability to get together people within the team, strengthening trust and collaboration among team members, and the ability to construct a sense of collective identity thanks to the promoted and personified values (Brown et al., 2005). Regarding the teamwork, trust and collaboration refer to the ability of NPO members to cooperate in a dynamic adaptive way to pursue common goals, valuing support, diversity, and co-construction of goals (Salas, Dickinson, Converse, & Tannenbaum, 1992; Wageman, 2003; Wageman, Hackman, & Lehman, 2005). Therefore, leaders who encourage trust and cooperation focus on the importance of members encouraging each other, force themselves to continually nurture respect and trust among followers, and encourage a sense of supportiveness (West et al., 2015). The culture of trust is fundamental because it provides high quality services (West, Eckert, Steward, & Pasmore, 2014). Volunteers should carry out their activities in a positive environment, in which they can look forward to arriving and performing their tasks as well as possible. Collective identity, which is closely related to teamwork, emerges from a positive vision of the team, characterized by a sense of pride and recognition of the goals pursued and the practices implemented to fulfil them (West et al., 2015). As reported by Walumbwa and colleagues (2011), ethical leaders, by ensuring a positive leader-member relationship, reinforce a core principle of social exchange theory, namely the norm of reciprocity (Bierstedt, 1965), according to which workers feel they are receiving a good treatment, and develop a sense of obligation toward other members of the organization (thus improving collaboration and a sense of collectiveness). Authors report that this approach, in turn, improves the way workers perceive their job and themselves as employees. These associations may be confirmed among NPOs as well. Indeed, volunteering-related role identities seem to have a crucial role in predicting volunteers' satisfaction toward their experiences in the NPO. More specifically, some authors reported that volunteers' identity is fostered by the perception of their individual relevance in the NPO, by the prestige of the organization, and by the congruence between personal and organizational values (Grube & Piliavin, 2000). In other words, volunteers tend to report positive beliefs about their organization and their contribution to the NPO causes when they feel valued and bonded with other members of the organization. Importantly, Vecina and colleagues showed in a longitudinal study that the degree of satisfaction with and commitment in the organization is strongly related to these aspects of volunteer role identity. More precisely, the authors suggested that the specific NPO in which the volunteers are enrolled has an impact on how they perceive their role identity and, in turn, on their engagement and satisfaction (Vecina, Chacón Fuertes, & Sueiro Abad, 2010). This suggests that the way managers lead the NPO may have a major role in volunteers' beliefs about the organization and the job, and, consequently, about themselves as volunteers. In this regard, in a more recent contribution Toepler and Anheier (2013) stated that NPO leaders are required to carefully focus on volunteers' goals and values, as "standard" incentives, such as money or other material rewards, cannot be used. Furthermore, the authors underlined that not addressing this intangible, value-driven, dimension constitutes a threat to the precarious balance that characterizes the management of NPO staff. In other words, NPO managers need to show a person-centered approach to management, in which the volunteers' individuality and free will are recognized, along with the need to pursue a personal, direct relationship with the staff (Jäger, Kreutzer, & Beyes, 2009). Thus, an ethical approach to leadership seems to be an optimal option for NPO managers.

Giving value to trust, teamwork, and the collective identity of workers has been shown to have an impact on work engagement, too (Barbieri, Amato, Passafaro, Dal Corso, & Picciau, 2014; Gozukara & Simsek, 2015). In response to an increase in collective identity at work, employees engage more proactively in tasks aiming to fulfill organizational goals and mission, rather than individual interests (Falco et al., 2017; Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003). Work engagement is described as a positive, fulfilling state related to one's own job (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008). The association between leadership styles and engagement was shown with regard to volunteers, too. According to Barker work engagement in volunteering is sustained by compassion and willingness to help others, and to improve one's own local community, as well as the opportunity to gain new skills and experiences (Barker, 1993). An ethical, other-oriented approach to leadership may fulfill these needs.

At the same time, studies addressing the consequences of work engagement in samples of employees showed that this construct is variously linked with job-related and personal life-related dimensions, such as commitment, motivation to learn, life satisfaction, and job satisfaction (Extremera Pacheco, Durán, Rey, & Montalbán, 2005; Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006; Salanova Soria, Martínez Martínez, Bresó Esteve, Llorens Gumbau, & Grau Gumbau, 2005). Again, these associations have been shown with work engagement in volunteering. The theoretical foundation of these relationships could be the job demands-resources model (JD-R; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017), a likely effective framework to analyze the voluntary sector, too, as the literature shows (Harp, Scherer, & Allen, 2017; Huynh, Xanthopoulou, & Winefield, 2014; Setti et al., 2018). According to it, all job characteristics are classifiable as demands — aspects requiring efforts — or resources — aspects reducing negative outcomes and fostering goal achievement. Effective leaders could inspire and encourage their followers, so they can be considered job resources. The latter, by activating the motivational process of the JD-R model, are capable of increasing positive outcomes (Falco, Dal Corso, Girardi, De Carlo, & Comar, 2018; Schaufeli, 2017; Schaufeli & Taris, 2014).

With regard to our study, the association between volunteers' work engagement and volunteer satisfaction is particularly relevant. Vecina and colleagues showed that work engagement is associated to higher satisfaction in volunteers, according to the three faces model of volunteer satisfaction (Vecina et al., 2012). Similarly to the findings related to work engagement, Nencini and colleagues showed that volunteer engagement is connected with several organizational and personal dimensions, such as social bonds, personal interests, and available information about roles and the organization (Nencini et al., 2016). Such results not only confirm the association between the several facets of volunteer satisfaction (Vecina et al., 2012) and engagement, but also provide further suggestions about the possible links between the promotion of collective identity and collaboration and volunteer satisfaction.

Overall, volunteers' work engagement appears to have a central role in the relationship between leadership characteristics and volunteer satisfaction: for this reason, we aim to show that work engagement mediates the relationship between the two.

Leadership styles, therefore, may offer relevant clues to the challenging issue of managing volunteers. Despite this, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have considered potential mediating factors of the relationship between leadership and volunteer satisfaction, and no studies have considered specific dimensions of leadership when addressing this relationship. Consequently, we aim to verify the effect of some specific dimensions of leadership on job satisfaction, and to verify the effect of volunteers' work engagement as a mediator of this relationship.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

One hundred ninety-five Italian volunteers completed a self-report questionnaire. Participants carry out their activities in Italian social services NPO and were recruited on voluntary basis. The sample average age was 38.03 years ($SD = 16.27$) and gender distribution was 53.2% women and 46.8% men. For an accurate description of the sample, see Table 1. All participants gave their written informed consent before the administration of the questionnaire.

TABLE 1
 Sample characteristics

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	38.03	16.27
	Minimum	Maximum
	14	76
Gender	<i>N</i>	%
Female	100	51.3
Male	88	45.1
Missing	7	3.6
Total	195	100
Educational level	<i>N</i>	%
High school	77	39.5
Elementary or junior high school	61	31.2
Bachelor degree	23	11.8
Master degree	20	10.3
Postgraduate study	14	7.2
Total	195	100
Duration of service as a volunteer	<i>N</i>	%
12 months or more	136	69.7
6 to 12 months	37	19.0
Up to 6 months	22	11.3
Total	195	100
Occupation	<i>N</i>	%
Student	51	26.2
Employee	43	22.1
Freelance professional	25	12.8
Retiree	24	12.4
Homemaker	18	9.2
Unemployed	16	8.2
Workman	10	5.1
Teacher	3	1.5
Executive	3	1.5
Merchant	1	0.5
Missing	1	0.5
Total	195	100

Measures

In order to assess the constructs under investigation, we used the following measures.

Creating a *sense of collective identity* and encouraging *trust and cooperation* were assessed with 12 items taken from Key Leadership Behaviors – The King’s Fund Cultural Leadership Programme (West, 2016). We derived the Italian version of the scales from their English versions by using the back-translation method, with the collaboration of some native speakers. The 5-point Likert scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale creating a sense of collective identity and encouraging trust and cooperation are .89 and .91, respectively.

Work engagement was assessed with the Italian version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9; Balducci, Fraccaroli, & Schaufeli, 2010). The 7-point Likert scale ranged from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*always*). The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .95.

Volunteer satisfaction was assessed with the Volunteer Satisfaction Index (Vecina et al., 2009). We derived the Italian version of the scale from its Spanish version by using the back-translation method, with the collaboration of some native speakers. The 10-point Likert scale ranged from 1 (*I totally disagree*) to 10 (*I absolutely agree*). The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .90.

Statistical Analysis

We carried out two confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to check the psychometrics properties of two measures, by using the Lisrel 8.80 software (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2006). The first CFA investigated the Key Leadership Behaviors Scale. The other CFA evaluated the Volunteers Satisfaction Index. We evaluated CFAs results by using the χ^2 statistic and other fit indices: nonnormed fit index (NNFI), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the standardized root mean residual (SRMR). To evaluate the construct reliability and the convergent validity, we computed the composite reliability (ρ_c) and the average variance extracted (AVE) respectively.

Then, we tested our hypotheses estimating structural equation models (SEM) with latent variables.

We assessed the model fit, starting with the chi-square test (χ^2) and also considering additional fit indices. In particular, we considered the NNFI, the SRMR, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA).

To verify the significance of the indirect effects, 95% asymmetric confidence intervals were considered, based on the distribution of the multiplication term. We used this technique to manage the nonnormality derived from the *path a * path b* multiplication, as recommended by MacKinnon’s procedure (PRODCLIN; MacKinnon, 2008; MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, & Lockwood, 2007). If the confidence interval does not contain zero, the mediation is significant (MacKinnon, Cheong, & Pirlott, 2012).

RESULTS

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations. The latter provide initial evidence that all variables may be positively associated to each other.

CFAs results suggest that the Italian versions of the two measures evaluated have good psychometrics properties. In fact, the fit indices of the Key Leadership Behaviors Scale showed an acceptable fit

TABLE 2
 Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Sense of collective identity	4.11	0.70	1.00			
2. Trust and cooperation	3.98	0.83	.72**	1.00		
3. Work engagement	4.18	0.73	.46**	.43**	1.00	
4. Volunteer satisfaction	7.80	1.60	.47**	.50**	.61**	1.00

Note. *N* = 195. ** *p* < .01.

(Schermelleh-Engel, Moosbrugger, & Müller, 2003) of the theoretical model to the data, $\chi^2(53) = 216.55$, *p* = .00; NNFI = .95; CFI = .96; SRMR = .05. Construct reliability and convergent validity were verified (Miceli & Barbaranelli, 2015), since $\rho_c = .95$ and AVE = .76. Concerning the Volunteer Satisfaction Index, fit indices showed an acceptable fit of the theoretical model to the data, $\chi^2(132) = 552.41$, *p* = .00; NNFI = .95; CFI = .95; SRMR = .05. Construct reliability and convergent validity were verified, since $\rho_c = .87$ and AVE = .54.

Then, we estimated the hypothesized structural model that satisfied the acceptability criteria, $\chi^2(16) = 30.29$, *p* < .02; NNFI = .98; SRMR = .04; RMSEA = .07. In the model (Figure 1), creating a sense of collective identity and encouraging trust and cooperation are positively associated to work engagement ($\gamma = .33$, *p* < .01; $\gamma = .19$, *p* < .05, respectively), which, in turn, is positively related to volunteer satisfaction ($\beta = .56$, *p* < .001).

Then, we verified the significance of the indirect effects. The asymmetric confidence interval for the relationship between creating a sense of collective identity and volunteer satisfaction, through work engagement, does not contain zero [.17, .66]. We can conclude that the specific indirect effect is significant.

The asymmetric confidence interval for the relationship between encouraging trust and cooperation and volunteer satisfaction, through work engagement, does not contain zero [.01, .40]. We can therefore conclude that the specific indirect effect is significant, too. Given that the paths connecting antecedents and outcome are not significant, we conclude that in either case the mediation of work engagement is total.

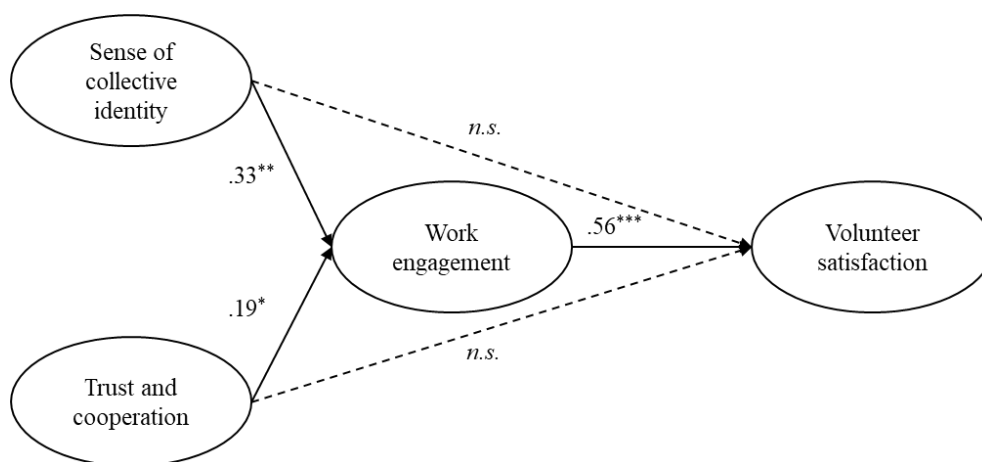


FIGURE 1
 The final model.
 * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

DISCUSSION

The leadership of volunteers plays a central role in their well-being (Schreiner, Trent, Prange, & Allen, 2018), in terms of engagement, intentions to remain (Mayr, 2017), effectiveness, and proactive behaviors (Do Nascimento, Porto, & Kwantes, 2018). Drawing on 80 years of research (Woods & West, 2014), we intend to thoroughly examine the essence of effective leadership in NPOs by tracing some key behaviors (West et al., 2015). Therefore, the aim of this study was to verify the effect of some specific dimensions of leadership — such as creating a sense of collective identity and encouraging trust and cooperation — on volunteers' satisfaction, hypothesizing the mediation of work engagement.

We found that creating a sense of collective identity and encouraging trust and cooperation are positively associated with volunteer satisfaction. However, these relationships are explained only by work engagement; hence, the latter totally mediates the relations between the two antecedents and the outcome.

Therefore, a leader who encourages a sense of identity for the group — by enabling team members to see how their work makes a positive difference and by emphasizing the importance of people supporting one another — and continually develops mutual respect in the team may increase volunteers' satisfaction. However, this can happen only if volunteers are enthusiastic about their activities, feel strong and vigorous, and are immersed in their tasks. As a result, volunteers will be more satisfied with the motivation to volunteer, with the duties and the tasks performed, and with the organizational management.

As mentioned above, we can explain these results by means of the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017). Leaders who create a sense of collective identity and encourage trust and cooperation nurture their followers' job resources. They enable the motivational process of the JD-R model, which — moving from the availability of job resources and passing through work engagement — increases positive outcomes.

The relational dimension is central in the volunteering context: relational factors may be of higher importance when managing volunteers as opposed to employees. Therefore, emphasizing this facet as a leader — for instance by sharing identity, cooperation, and trust — is vital for the well-being of volunteers who will be more engaged and, consequently, more satisfied.

Coordinating volunteers is a multifaceted and complex function, not limited to managing volunteers' activities. The importance of adequately training coordinators' relational skills is undeniable, in particular through interventions involving communication, soft, and positive, managerial skills (De Carlo, Dal Corso, Falco, Girardi, & Piccirelli, 2016; Donaldson-Feilder, Yarker, & Lewis, 2011).

This research reflects the specific limitations of self-report measures and cross-sectional studies: for example, the common method variance and the impossibility of determining the direction of the relationships, respectively. Even if strong reasons support our results, future researchers may choose to conduct longitudinal and multi-method studies (Falco et al., 2012, 2013, 2018; Girardi, De Carlo, Dal Corso, Andreassen, & Falco, 2019). Furthermore, in line with the JD-R model, future research could also investigate the role of personal demands and resources in the relationship between leadership behaviors and work engagement (Falco, Piccirelli, Girardi, Di Sipio, & De Carlo, 2014; Girardi, Falco, De Carlo, Dal Corso, & Benevene, 2018).

Another limitation is the restricted generalizability of the results, because the data were collected only in one country. It would be interesting to replicate this study in other countries on a comparative basis.

The study gives a rather innovative contribution, because it helps to fill the two previously mentioned gaps. First, it finds a mediator in the relation between leadership and volunteer satisfaction. Second, it considers specific and basic dimensions of volunteer leadership when addressing this relationship.

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