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Leadership, Value Congruence and Work Engagement: A Two-Wave Study

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Abstract

Sustaining employees' work engagement remains a critical challenge for contemporary organizations, particularly in contexts marked by increasing complexity and changing job demands. Despite extensive attention to engagement, less is known about how leadership behaviors contribute to engagement through employees' perceptions of it with their organization. Drawing on fit theory, the present study examines the relationship between leadership behaviors and work engagement, focusing on the role of person–organization fit. To this end, the current paper presents a theoretical model positing value congruence (a core element of person–organization fit) as a key factor in mediating the positive relationship between the perceptions of leadership behaviors and work engagement. To test this assertion, a two-wave study using a final sample of 143 employees from a food industry company was designed. Results from structural equation modelling (SEM) supported the hypothesized model, such that, over time, the perceptions of leadership behaviors were associated with higher value congruence, which, in turn, was associated with higher work engagement. In addition, value congruence fully mediated the relationship between the perceptions of leadership behaviors and work engagement, even after controlling for the effect of gender, age, and organizational tenure. Practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: perception of leadership; value congruence; work engagement; person–organization fit



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly disrupted social and organizational systems, acting as a large-scale stress test for the sustainability of work arrangements and employment relationships. Beyond its immediate health and economic consequences, the pandemic has triggered widespread reflections on life priorities, personal values, and the meaning of work [1,2]. These reflections have translated into tangible socio-economic outcomes, most notably the surge in voluntary turnover globally, a phenomenon labelled the Great Resignation [3,4]. From a sustainability perspective, this trend represents a critical challenge to organizations' capability to retain human capital, ensure viability, and maintain healthy workplaces over time [2]. Such large-scale disruptions can be conceptualized as sense-breaking events [5], capable of prompting deep narrative shifts in how individuals relate their sense of self [6] to their organizational membership [7]. When these

narratives fracture, employees may reassess whether the organization remains compatible with themselves, with direct implications for long-term engagement and retention [8]. In this regard, prior empirical research showed that employees' perceptions of fit with the organization and their job role constitute a fundamental precondition for cultivating work engagement [9–11]. When employees perceive coherence between their own values and those promoted by their organization (i.e., value congruence)—as well as between their needs or abilities and their job role (i.e., demands–abilities and needs–supplies fit)—they experience a sense of self-fulfillment and meaningful involvement at work [12].

Among other forms of fit perceptions, value congruence can be understood as a psychological indicator of sustainable organizations, reflecting the degree to which organizations and their human resources systems succeed in aligning individual and collective values over time [13]. According to Schneider [14], within attraction–selection–attrition dynamics, individuals are more likely to join and remain in organizations that align with their personal values. Indeed, employees choose to invest themselves as valuable organizational members when they perceive a strong correspondence between what they consider meaningful in their lives and what the organization prioritizes [15,16]. Conversely, persistent misalignment undermines motivation and increases withdrawal and turnover intentions [17,18].

Among the possible organizational antecedents of value congruence, this study focuses on employees' perceptions of leadership behaviors [19]. Leaders play a pivotal role as they are normatively responsible for transmitting organizational values [20] while simultaneously enabling employees' self-expression and meaningful participation at work [21]. Acting as a bridge between individuals and the organization, leaders are directly involved in shaping higher levels of employees' perceptions of fit [22,23] and work engagement [24–29]. Recent evidence further suggests that leadership affects engagement indirectly by modelling employees' fit perceptions, thereby shaping how individuals interpret their alignment with the organizational context and work conditions [30,31].

Despite these advances, the few studies available linking leadership, fit perceptions, and work engagement have only employed cross-sectional designs. Specifically, Bamford et al. [32] identified overall fit perceptions as mediators between authentic leadership and work engagement, while Bui et al. [33] showed that demands–abilities fit mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and engagement. Notably, empirical evidence supported the distinctiveness of different forms of fit rather than a single overarching construct [34]. Indeed, other forms of fit, such as demands–abilities and needs–supplies fit, primarily refer to the alignment between individuals and the demands or resources associated with their job role [34]. Instead, value congruence pertains to the alignment between individuals' core beliefs and the broader normative and symbolic foundations of the organization that transcends immediate role functioning [34]. As such, the unique contribution of value congruence as a personally sustainable mechanism linking leadership and engagement remains insufficiently understood. In addition, while previous studies [32,33] have primarily focused on specific leadership styles, such as transformational and authentic leadership, the present study adopts a different perspective by drawing on the Perceptions of Social Context (PoSC) framework [35]. Rather than capturing leaders' specific behavioral styles or attributes, PoSC focuses on prototypical and positive behavioral patterns that recur across organizational contexts. These behaviors typically concern core domains of social interaction with employees, such as supporting employee development, fostering participation in decision making, and promoting equity [35]. As such, PoSC provides a lens on how these recurring behaviors inform employees' understanding of the organizational context, serving as a frame of reference to gain information, assign sense to events, and interpret experiences [35]. Therefore, this study aims to examine the longitudinal associations

between perceptions of leadership, value congruence, and work engagement. In addition, it aims to examine value congruence in the relationship between perceived leadership behaviors and work engagement. To this end, a two-wave mediation model was employed, offering insights into how leadership-driven value congruence can contribute to work engagement in times of profound societal and organizational change. As such, this study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it examines the role of perceived leadership behaviors in shaping employees' value congruence over time, extending prior research by adopting a PoSC-based perspective on leadership [35]. Second, it extends existing research by isolating the specific longitudinal contribution of value congruence to work engagement, conceptualized as an indicator of sustainable employee involvement. Third, it tests the mediating role of value congruence in the relationship between perceptions of leadership and work engagement. By testing these relationships using a time-lagged design, we provide stronger evidence for the proposed mechanisms linking leadership and work engagement over time.

1.1. Perception of Leadership and Value Congruence

Person–organization (P-O) fit is “the compatibility between people (employees) and organizations that occurs when (a) at least one entity provides what the other needs, or (b) they share similar fundamental characteristics, (c) both” (Ref. [36]: 4–5). Based on this definition, P-O fit is complementary when the individual and the organization possess different yet dependent characteristics, so that they complement each other [13,37]. Instead, the similarity of relevant characteristics between the individual and an organization, like value congruence, is defined as supplementary fit [13,38]. Accordingly, value congruence is achieved when the employee and the organization possess and approve the same values [13,14].

Value congruence can be determined by top-down, organizational processes like leadership [19]. From a theoretical standpoint, organizational identification [15,39], that is, viewing a collective's defining characteristic as coherent with one's self-definition [40], helps understand how leaders may foster higher value congruence. If organizations are storytelling systems [15], then leaders feed, as a part of their role, individual narratives through sense-giving [40]. Essentially, they guide and socially validate a shared meaning of the organizational reality [40]. Indeed, leaders act as organizational models for their coworkers, showcasing or emphasizing values with which they can identify [30]. In addition to sharing organizational values, leaders still promote employee self-determination [30], likely helping an idiosyncratic coalescence with the organization [15]. Indeed, previous studies have confirmed the influence of different leadership styles (e.g., transformational leadership) on value congruence [41,42].

In the present study, we assessed leadership behaviors employing the Perceptions of Social Context framework (PoSC) [35]. The PoSC framework naturally captures the perceptions that individuals have in relation to the prototypical, positive behaviors of their immediate supervisor. These behaviors encompass both task-related and relational aspects of interaction that contribute to the satisfaction of fundamental social motives in the workplace, such as the need for belonging, trusting, understanding, controlling, and self-enhancement [35]. Within this framework, supervisors play a central role in shaping employees' work experience and social meaning of the organizational context, by providing structure and feedback, supporting individual development, fostering participation in decision making, and promoting fairness in interpersonal exchanges [35]. In this sense, leaders' behaviors may act as a relational catalyst for the integration of personal and collective identities [43,44]. By signaling what is valued and legitimized within the organization, they provide employees with interpretive cues that support the alignment between personal and

organizational value systems. Accordingly, the perception of positive leadership behaviors may foster value congruence over time. Hence, we hypothesized that

Hypothesis 1. *Perceptions of leadership will be positively associated with value congruence over time.*

1.2. Value Congruence and Work Engagement

Individuals are meaning seekers [45,46], continuously shaping a personal sense of themselves in the world in relation to the collectives they tune to [15,47]. Not surprisingly, value congruence generates an intrinsic willingness to devote increased effort to the organization [48]. One way to assess this outcome is provided by work engagement, that is, a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption [49]. Essentially, engagement captures the degree to which workers experience their work as a meaningful and self-rewarding pursuit on which to devote time and effort [50]. The relationship between P-O fit, also in the form of value congruence, and work engagement has been corroborated in previous studies [51–54]. Indeed, individuals who experience a bond between personal and organizational features are likely to feel motivated to work harder to achieve goals and activities [55]. Therefore, it can be expected that when employees perceive themselves to be in tune with organizational values, they may naturally feel more engaged in their work. Hence, we hypothesized that

Hypothesis 2. *Value Congruence will be positively associated with Work Engagement over time.*

1.3. The Mediating Role of Value Congruence Between Leadership and Work Engagement

The influence of leadership on work engagement is well known in the literature [30]. However, scholars have only recently begun to look at the mechanisms underlying this relationship. In a recent meta-analysis, Decuyper and Schaufeli [30] suggested that leader–coworker exchanges enhance engagement by nurturing basic psychological needs (i.e., motivational pathway) and shaping the perceptions of environmental resources and demands at one’s disposal (i.e., material pathway). In essence, leaders care about coworkers’ self-fulfillment and promote growth by helping them frame, enrich/optimize, and capitalize on experiences within the organization [56–59].

In such a framework, fit perceptions naturally constitute a psychological mechanism to explain the leadership–engagement relationship. Prior research has found that leadership, assessed as authentic leadership or transformational leadership [32,33], increases work engagement by enhancing the compatibility between oneself and the job. Although value congruence has not been distinctly accounted as a mediator in previous studies, it is interesting to note that both styles of leadership act on value systems [60]. Authentic leaders display behaviors that are congruent with their own and others’ value perspective [61], while transformational leaders act as role models to build a collective sense of organizational mission [62]. Indeed, leader–coworker relationships are a vehicle for the integration between personal and collective identities [15,39,40]. From a PoSC perspective, leaders create opportunities for coworkers to act in accordance with their internalized values by providing shared frames of reference that guide interpretation and action, fostering participatory and equal environments, and recognizing and nurturing individuals’ idiosyncratic orientations and characteristics [35]. Thus, we argue that when employees perceive that their leader supports their own self-growth and belongingness, they will be more likely to perceive that their values fit with the organizational ones, thereby increasing the chance of feeling psychologically engaged in their work. Hence, we hypothesized that

Hypothesis 3. *Values congruence mediates the relationship between Perception of leadership and Work Engagement over time.*

Figure 1 represents the overarching conceptual model that guides the present study.

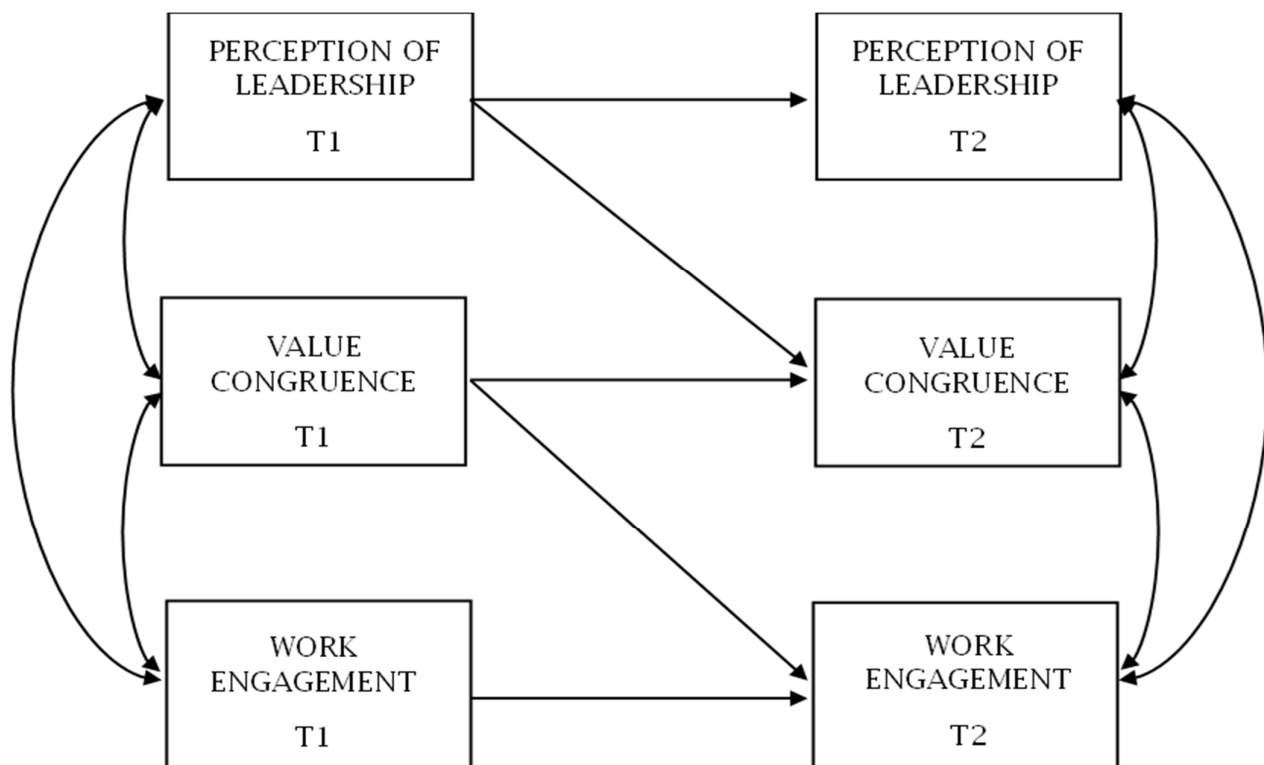


Figure 1. The hypothesized longitudinal mediation model.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Procedure and Sample

This study employed a longitudinal survey design, administering online self-report questionnaires to a randomly selected sample of employees from one division of a large Italian food company. To initiate the study, the research team contacted the organizational division to discuss the implementation of questionnaires to provide insights into its internal dynamics and their evolution over time. The organization facilitated the dissemination of online questionnaires to employees at two time points, spaced 6 months apart. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was emphasized to encourage candid responses. The survey complied with the Declaration of Helsinki and the principles outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA). To preserve anonymity while enabling longitudinal data linkage, participants were instructed to create and input a self-generated, anonymous code during each wave of data collection. In line with previously published studies [63], this approach was chosen for its effectiveness in capturing reliable individual-level data over time while ensuring anonymity.

Of the 500 employees invited, the sample initially comprised 229 employees (response rate: 45.8%), with 165 males (72.1%) and 64 females (27.9%). The average age was 43.29 ($SD = 10.16$), while the average organizational tenure was 17.72 years ($SD = 9.82$). Regarding educational level, the majority of the sample had a high school degree (55.9%, $N = 128$), while 44.1% ($N = 101$) of participants had a bachelor's or master's degree. In relation to a professional qualification, 50% ($N = 114$) were white-collar workers, 34% ($N = 78$) were blue-collar workers, and the remaining 16% ($N = 37$) were managers. In this regard, it is worth noting that, for our study, we excluded top managers' responses due to the absence of direct reports on which to assess the leadership items.

The sociodemographic characteristics of the sample were generally in line with the distribution of the full population of 500 employees, suggesting a representative sample. Gender (375 males and 125 females), age ($M = 45.00$, $SD = 9.00$), organizational tenure ($M = 20.00$, $SD = 10.00$), and education level (300 with a high school degree and 200 with bachelor's or master's degree) distributions in the sample relatively mirrored that of the division population. However, the professional qualification in our sample deviated slightly from the population distribution, where blue-collar workers make up a larger proportion compared to white-collar workers and managers. In the population of 500 employees, 60% ($N = 300$) were blue-collar workers, 30% ($N = 150$) were white-collar workers, and 10% ($N = 50$) were managers. This discrepancy may be attributed to the fact that white-collar workers and managers, who typically have access to workstations with computers, were more likely to participate in the online survey.

The final sample comprised 143 employees who responded to both data points, given that 86 participants dropped out at T2 (retention rate: 62.5%). The participants included 65.7% ($N = 94$) males and 34.3% ($N = 49$) females. The average age of the participants was 46.21 years ($SD = 9.73$), while the average organizational tenure was 17.14 years ($SD = 10.33$). Regarding educational level, 69.2% employees ($N = 99$) had a high school degree, while 30.8% ($N = 44$) had a bachelor's or master's degree. Moreover, the participants were 18.2% ($N = 26$) middle managers, 52.4% ($N = 75$) white-collar workers, and 29.4% ($N = 42$) blue-collar workers. Although dropouts are quite common in longitudinal research, a series of one-way ANOVAs was conducted to preliminarily verify that participants included only at T1 and those who remained at T2 did not significantly differ on any of the study variables (F values ranged from 0.150 to 0.669, with p values ranging from 0.414 to 0.699), thus suggesting the absence of systematic attrition bias. An a priori sample size calculation was conducted to assess the adequacy of the final sample for testing the conceptual model. Specifically, G*Power 3.1 was used to estimate the required sample size for the direct paths [64], while the Monte Carlo method with 5000 replications was employed to estimate the power of the indirect effect, assuming a two-sided significance level of 0.05 [65]. Results indicated that a sample of 143 participants provides sufficient power (0.96) to detect a medium-sized effect ($\beta = 0.30$) for the direct paths. In addition, Monte Carlo power analysis based on the observed correlations among the study variables indicated adequate power (0.99) for detecting the indirect effect.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Perception of Leadership

Perception of Leadership was assessed by using four items from Borgogni and colleagues [35]. The items measure the perception of the immediate supervisor's behaviors in supporting individual development, fostering participation in decision making, and promoting fairness in interpersonal exchanges (e.g., *"My supervisor guarantees all the assistance I need to best carry out my job"*; *"My supervisor enhances the professional skills of his/her coworkers"*). Participants rated their agreement on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*"strongly disagree"*) to 7 (*"strongly agree"*). The reliability of the scale was $\alpha = 0.89$ at T1 and $\alpha = 0.88$ at T2.

2.2.2. Value Congruence

Value congruence, assessing the perception of correspondence between one's own values and those of the organization, was measured through a three-item scale from Cable and DeRue [66] (e.g., *"My personal values match my organization's values and culture"*; *"The things that I value in life are very similar to the things that my organization values"*).

Participants rated their agreement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“completely”). The reliability of the scale was $\alpha = 0.90$ at T1 and $\alpha = 0.91$ at T2.

2.2.3. Work Engagement

Work engagement was assessed by using the ultra-short three-item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-3) from Schaufeli and colleagues [67]. Items specifically measure a positive psychological state of self-fulfillment characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (e.g., “At my work, I feel bursting with energy”; “I am enthusiastic about my job”). Participants rated their agreement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“never”) to 5 (“always”). The reliability of the scale was $\alpha = 0.86$ at T1 and $\alpha = 0.90$ at T2.

2.3. Statistical Analyses

To examine the proposed relationships, we adopted a cross-lagged panel design, which is particularly suitable for testing mediation processes across two time points [68,69]. Autoregressive paths were specified for all constructs to account for their temporal stability, thereby ensuring more accurate estimation of the cross-lagged parameters. In addition, covariates (i.e., gender, age, and organizational tenure) were included in the model and regressed onto the variables involved in the cross-lagged associations.

All analyses were conducted within a structural equation modelling (SEM) framework using Mplus version 8.1 [70], with maximum likelihood (ML) estimation. A latent variable approach was employed to test longitudinal measurement invariance, as it allows for the explicit modelling of measurement error and provides more robust parameter estimates [71,72]. Following prior studies [73], we evaluated invariance across T1 and T2 through a sequence of increasingly restrictive models: configural invariance (no equality constraints; M1), metric invariance (factor loadings constrained to equality; M2), and scalar invariance (factor loadings and intercepts constrained; M3). Model fit was assessed using multiple indices, including the chi-square statistic (χ^2), the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). Acceptable fit was indicated by CFI values ≥ 0.90 , RMSEA ≤ 0.08 , and SRMR ≤ 0.08 [74,75]. Longitudinal measurement invariance was evaluated by examining model changes fit across nested models. Given the sensitivity of the chi-square statistic to sample size, we considered both $\Delta\chi^2$ and changes in approximate fit indices. Invariance was supported when changes in CFI were smaller than 0.01, in combination with changes in RMSEA ≤ 0.015 and SRMR ≤ 0.030 (metric) or ≤ 0.015 (scalar) [75].

After establishing measurement invariance, we tested the structural model by comparing a set of nested models. Specifically, we estimated: (1) a partial mediation model including covariates and a direct path from perception of leadership at T1 to work engagement at T2 (M1); (2) a reduced partial mediation model in which non-significant covariate effects were fixed to zero (M2); (3) the hypothesized full mediation model, in which both non-significant covariate effects and the direct path were constrained to zero (M3). The comparison between M2 and M3 allowed us to determine whether the indirect effect fully accounted for the relationship between perception of leadership at T1 and work engagement at T2. The hypothesized relationships were examined using path analysis within the SEM framework, and nested models were compared to evaluate the contribution of direct and indirect effects. Indirect effects were estimated following the procedures outlined by MacKinnon et al. [76], and their significance was assessed using bootstrapped confidence intervals based on 1000 resamples [77]. Finally, control variables (gender, age, and organizational tenure) were retained in the final model only when statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

3. Results

3.1. Zero-Order Correlations

All variables were positively and significantly correlated (see Table 1). Specifically, concurrent correlations at T1 were significant at $p < 0.001$ and ranged between $|0.45|$ (perception of leadership with value congruence) and $|0.48|$ (perception of leadership with work engagement). Consistently, correlations ranged between $|0.51|$ (perception of leadership with value congruence) and $|0.54|$ (perception of leadership with work engagement) at time 2. Longitudinal correlations were also significant at $p < 0.001$ and ranged between $|0.33|$ (value congruence at T1 with perception of leadership at T2) and $|0.49|$ (both perception of leadership and value congruence at T1 with work engagement at T2).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations.

Variables	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) Perception of Leadership T1	5.03	1.42	(0.89)					
(2) Value congruence T1	3.37	0.82	0.45 ***	(0.90)				
(3) Work Engagement T1	4.05	0.69	0.48 ***	0.47 ***	(0.86)			
(4) Perception of Leadership T2	4.72	1.51	0.80 ***	0.33 ***	0.42 ***	(0.88)		
(5) Value congruence T2	3.22	0.85	0.47 ***	0.57 ***	0.37 ***	0.51 ***	(0.91)	
(6) Work Engagement T2	3.88	0.78	0.49 ***	0.49 ***	0.74 ***	0.54 ***	0.53 ***	(0.90)

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; coefficient alpha reliability estimates are presented in brackets along the diagonal.

3.2. Structural Equation Analyses

3.2.1. Measurement Models

All measurement models—M1 (configural model), M2 (metric model), and M3 (scalar model)—showed a reasonable fit to the data (Table 2). Moreover, analyses supported longitudinal measurement invariance up to the scalar level (i.e., factor loadings and intercepts equality held across T1 and T2). Indeed, differences between the models' fit indices (M1–M2 and M2–M3, respectively) matched recommended criteria. All standardized factor loadings had p values lower than 0.001 and were greater than 0.30 (ranging from 0.73 to 0.91 at T1 and from 0.79 to 0.91 at T2), confirming the appropriateness of each item as an indicator of the hypothesized latent dimensions.

Table 2. Results of Tests for Measurement Invariance across T1 and T2.

Model	χ^2	df	RMSEA	CFI	SRMR	ΔM	$\Delta\chi^2 (\Delta df)$	ΔCFI	$\Delta RMSEA$	$\Delta SRMR$
M1	248.215 ***	145	0.071	0.956	0.043	—	—	—	—	—
M2	260.942 ***	152	0.072	0.953	0.054	M1–M2	12.73 (7) ^{ns}	−0.003	0.001	0.011
M3	285.847 ***	162	0.074	0.947	0.061	M2–M3	24.91 (10) **	−0.006	0.002	0.007

Note: ^{ns} = $p > 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; At each step the prior model served as the baseline against which the subsequent specified model was compared in the sequence of invariance tests, all earlier constraints remained in place; M1 = configural model; M2 = model with metric invariance for each latent dimension; M3 = model with scalar invariance for each latent dimension; χ^2 = chi-square statistic; df = degrees of freedom; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual.

3.2.2. Structural Models and Mediation Analyses

As displayed in Table 3, the hypothesized full mediation model (M3) showed a good fit to the data, according to the above-mentioned criteria. In accordance with our hypotheses (see Figure 2), (H1) higher individual scores on perception of leadership at T1 predicted higher value congruence at T2 ($\beta = 0.220$, $SE = 0.070$, $p = 0.006$), and (H2) higher individual scores on value congruence at T1 significantly predicted higher levels of work engagement at T2 ($\beta = 0.247$, $SE = 0.057$, $p = 0.000$). Then, we tested whether the longitudinal

relationship between perception of leadership at T1 and work engagement at T2 was mediated through value congruence over time. Notably, all constructs exhibited strong autoregressive stability over time, indicating a substantial degree of temporal consistency in perceptions of leadership, value congruence, and work engagement.

Table 3. Fit results of structural models.

Model	χ^2	df	RMSEA	CFI	SRMR	ΔM	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf)	ΔCFI	$\Delta RMSEA$	$\Delta SRMR$
M1	11.926 ^{ns}	9	0.048	0.994	0.039	—	—	—	—	—
M2	25.677 ^{ns}	19	0.050	0.985	0.061	M1–M2	13.75 ^{ns} (10)	−0.009	0.002	0.022
M3	27.377 ^{ns}	20	0.060	0.984	0.062	M2–M3	1.70 ^{ns} (1)	−0.001	0.010	0.001

Note: ^{ns} = $p > 0.05$; M1 = partial mediation model with covariates (gender, age, organizational tenure) regressed on perception of leadership at time 1, value congruence at time 1 and 2, work engagement at time 2; M2 = M1 with all non-significant paths from covariates fixed to be 0; M3 = full mediation model with direct path from perception of leadership at time 1 on work engagement at time 2 fixed to be 0; χ^2 = chi-square statistic; df = degrees of freedom; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual.

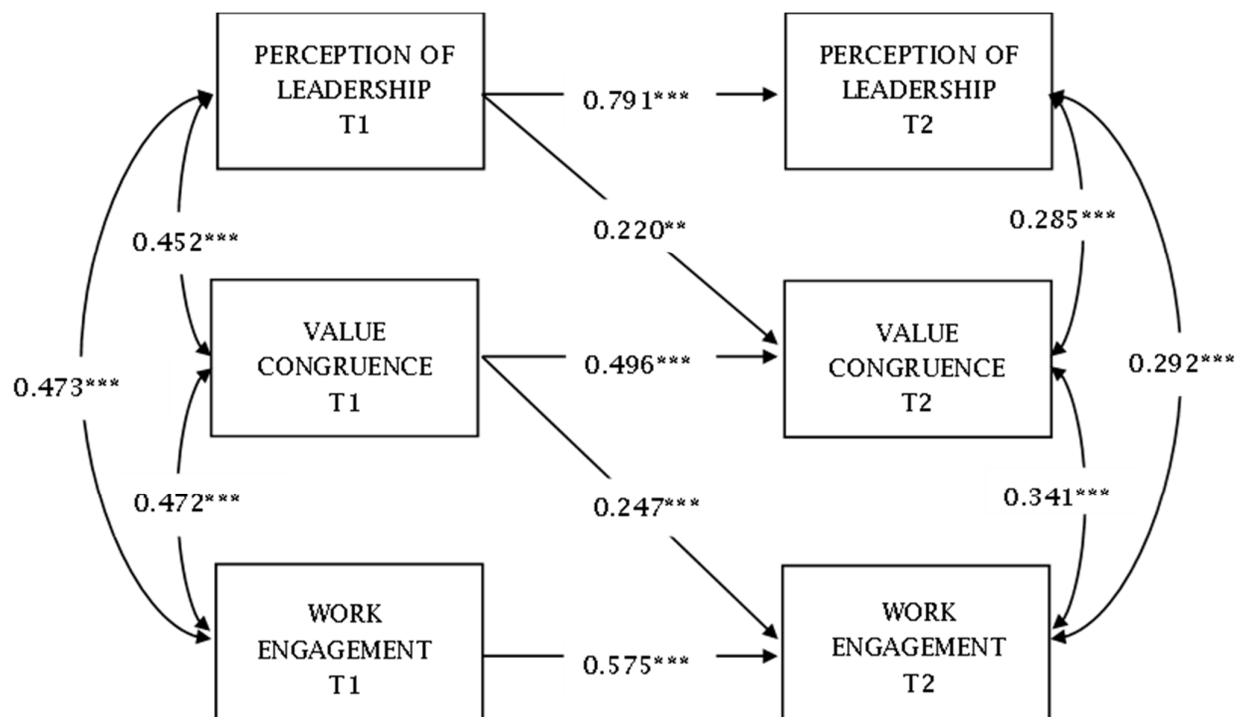


Figure 2. The hypothesized model with standardized estimates. Note: This figure represents a simplified version of Model 3 (see Table 3), omitting non-significant paths and covariates. The effects of covariates, as well as details about the parameter estimates, are reported in the text. ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

In a two-wave mediation design, the indirect effect can be estimated as the product of the coefficients associated with the cross-lagged relationship between perception of leadership at T1 with value congruence at T2, and (2) the cross-lagged relationship of value congruence at T1 with work engagement at T2. Thus, the resulting indirect effect was 0.030 and, albeit small in magnitude, the associated CI did not include zero (lower confidence limit = 0.003; upper confidence limit = 0.073), therefore supporting mediation. In order to further corroborate full mediation, we tested whether the mediation of value congruence between perception of leadership at T1 and work engagement at T2 was partial, by exploring the significance of a direct link between these variables (M2). This additional direct path did not significantly improve the fit of the model ($\Delta\chi^2$ (1) = 1.70, $p = 0.192$;

$\Delta CFI = -0.001$; $\Delta RMSEA = 0.010$; $\Delta SRMR = 0.001$), providing support for full mediation. Moreover, the significance of regressive paths between perceptions of leadership at T1 and value congruence at T2, as well as between value congruence at T1 and work engagement at T2, remained significant when also controlling for gender, age, and organizational tenure.

With regard to the control variables, regressive paths were kept in the model only when they resulted in statistically significant results. Compared to males, females showed lower levels of value congruence at T1 ($\beta = -0.225$, $SE = 0.069$, $p = 0.001$). Moreover, higher organizational tenure was related to lower levels of perception of leadership at T1 ($\beta = -0.148$, $SE = 0.071$, $p = 0.035$). Overall, the model explained a substantial amount of variance in work engagement at T2 (59.1%).

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the longitudinal relationships among employees' perceptions of leadership behaviors, value congruence, and work engagement, with a specific focus on understanding the psychological mechanisms that support sustainable employment relationships over time. Results from the empirical testing of our theoretical model confirmed the hypothesized relationships, showing that value congruence fully mediates the positive relationship between perceptions of prototypical leadership behaviors and work engagement. These findings highlight value congruence as a key mechanism through which leadership contributes to employees' motivational investment in their work over time.

From a theoretical perspective, and in line with our first hypothesis, our findings are consistent with fit theories and organizational identification approaches [13–15], which posit that leaders can catalyze a value-based alignment between individual and organizational identities. As role models, leaders transmit, enact, and reinforce organizational values with which coworkers may identify [44]. At the same time, leadership is oriented toward promoting employees' self-fulfillment and meaningful involvement at work by recognizing and supporting the expression of personal characteristics, including values [30]. Moreover, with respect to the second hypothesis, this study extends the literature on work engagement by showing that engagement is sustained by higher value congruence over time. When employees perceive that their personal values align with those of the organization, they are more likely to remain involved, energized, and psychologically connected to their work. Indeed, employees who can act in accordance with internalized values while contributing to the organizational mission experience an intrinsic motivation to invest effort and persist in their roles [30].

Notably, this study is the first to test the unique mediating role of value congruence in the relationship between leadership and work engagement over time. While prior research has extensively documented direct associations between leadership and engagement [30] and between value congruence and engagement [51–54], the specific contribution of value congruence as a mediating mechanism had remained unexplored. Our findings align with previous studies that examined perceived fit as a mediator between leadership and engagement [32,33], while extending them by demonstrating that value congruence alone is sufficient to fully explain this relationship longitudinally. This underscores the role of value alignment as a central psychological pathway through which leadership behaviors translate into sustained engagement. In this regard, our study focuses on value congruence as a form of person–organization fit, rather than person–job fit [34,66]. This distinction is theoretically meaningful and consistent with recent developments in fit theory, which emphasizes that different types of perceived fit are conceptually and metrically distinct and should therefore be examined separately [34,66]. Value congruence captures a more foundational and enduring form of alignment, as values are symbolic in nature yet exert long-term

effects on collective practices at the organizational level and on personal choices at the individual level [16,18,20]. Unlike material aspects of fit, such as the alignment between demands/supplies and employees' abilities/needs, value congruence reflects the deeper cultural and normative foundations that support organizational continuity and resilience. Furthermore, the longitudinal nature of our findings reinforces the view that leadership contributes to engagement by shaping employees' experienced value congruence over time. While previous studies have highlighted how leaders influence engagement by shaping perceptions of job resources and demands [30], our results suggest that symbolic mechanisms—such as value transmission and alignment—play an equally critical role. These findings call for further theoretical refinement regarding the distinctive features of value congruence as a mediating mechanism, particularly in comparison with more instrumental forms of fit.

4.1. Practical Implications

Our research model provides practical implications for organizations aiming to sustain employee engagement in the current and future world of work. First, as this study highlights, higher engagement can be achieved by strengthening employees' perceptions that their personal values are aligned with organizational ones. These findings position value congruence as a key psychological indicator of the quality and durability of the employment relationship, worthy of systematic monitoring to sustain employee engagement. Organizations may therefore benefit from embedding recurrent quantitative and qualitative assessment practices into existing HR routines. From a quantitative perspective, value congruence can be monitored by including a small set of items through periodic organizational surveys. From a qualitative perspective, organizations can collect narrative inputs through ad hoc focus groups, exploring what values employees perceive as promoted within the organization and whether they feel aligned with them. These insights may provide early indications of whether employees still see the organization as a meaningful context in which to invest their time and energy, enabling timely HR or managerial interventions before decreases in engagement may occur.

Second, while caution is warranted given the modest magnitude of the observed direct and indirect associations among variables, one way to foster value congruence and, in turn, work engagement is by investing in leadership. By enabling employees to experience alignment between personal and organizational values, leadership strengthens individuals' bonds with the organization and supports long-term engagement. Accordingly, leadership development initiatives should move beyond generic training and include targeted practices aimed at fostering value congruence in everyday interactions. At the ground level, such initiatives may take the form of targeted developmental pathways aimed at enhancing supervisors' awareness of both personal and organizational values, as well as of their social role in acting as a bridge between employees and the organization [44]. In this respect, leadership development may focus on fostering leaders' sense-giving capabilities, enabling them to translate organizational values into everyday practices by meaningfully connecting decisions, priorities, and work activities to individual and collective value systems [44]. At the same time, these initiatives may equip leaders with tools and techniques to recognize and engage with employees' personal value orientations, thereby supporting the expression and development of the values individuals bring into the workplace [30,44]. Specifically, leaders can be trained to cultivate ongoing and structured dialogue with employees (e.g., through regular one-on-one or team-based feedback practices), creating spaces in which individuals can articulate what they perceive as meaningful and how they interpret organizational values [30,44]. Embedding such practices within routine managerial behaviors may promote more inclusive and participatory work environments [57], in which value-

based integration between individuals and organizations is actively constructed through interaction [13–15].

4.2. Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations of this research should be acknowledged.

First, one limitation derives from the self-reported nature of measures, which might raise questions of common-method biases. The longitudinal design partially overcomes this limitation because previous levels of the variables are controlled, thus reducing the possible influence of this bias on effects [70,71]. Moreover, the best informants regarding value congruence as well as engagement are individuals. However, we suggest future research to replicate this study using a mix of self-reporting and objective or other-reported data.

Second, this study was conducted on a small sample of employees working in the Italian private sector. Thus, caution needs to be taken about the generalizability of the findings that need to be verified on larger samples and across different organizational settings. In this regard, given the cultural specificity of the sample, future research should examine whether the observed relationships hold across different national contexts. Comparative cross-cultural studies taking into account national differences in work values would therefore be particularly valuable in assessing the boundary conditions and generalizability of the present findings. In addition, the overrepresentation of white-collar workers and managers in the sample may have influenced the observed relationships, as, compared to blue-collar workers, these professional groups may have greater proximity to supervisors, which could have inflated perceptions of leadership across the two waves. Moreover, our hypotheses regarding the relationships between variables were tested using path analysis. Larger samples provide greater statistical power for testing the model with latent variables, reducing measurement error by accounting for shared variance among observed indicators [73,74].

Another limitation of our study is that the mediation effect was calculated using a two-wave design (called a half-longitudinal design in the literature on longitudinal mediation analysis). Whereas half-longitudinal designs are indubitably better in probing mediation effects than pure cross-sectional designs [70,71], future full-longitudinal studies are needed to confirm our results (i.e., designs with data gathered across at least three time points).

Some unexplored questions from this study should be addressed in future research. While we focused on the value component of fit perceptions (i.e., value congruence), the compatibility between employees and working environments is also fueled by other aspects. Therefore, it could be interesting for future research to examine how the present model works when simultaneously considering multiple fit constructs (i.e., demands–abilities and needs–supplies fit indicators) as mediators of the leadership–engagement association. Finally, to extend the findings of the present research, it would be interesting to reproduce the same model on those outcome variables that, in addition to engagement, provide information about performance and retention dynamics as well as well-being/strain indicators.

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to the understanding of the longitudinal associations between the perception of leadership, value congruence, and work engagement. We showed that leadership behaviors are an enabling condition for engagement by shaping the degree to which employees perceive their personal values as aligned with those of the organization. Most notably, the study highlighted the mediating role of value congruence in the relationship between leadership and engagement. In line with conceptualizations of organizational sustainability—a multidimensional and adaptive process encompassing

social, economic, and environmental dimensions—value congruence can be interpreted as a socio-psychological condition that reflects employees' sense of belonging to a meaningful social context, while simultaneously contributing to the stability and coherence of the organization's cultural and institutional identity over time [78,79]. These results, in addition to contributing to the understanding of the relationship mechanisms between leadership and engagement, also provide significant insights into the implications of fit theory to foster employee engagement, which could be of particular relevance for researchers dealing with studies in this field, as well as for practitioners dealing with motivation and retention policies in the workplace.

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