Leadership Impact on Employee Well-being:
The Order Picker's Voice

Ilse Cretskens*, Katrien Ramaekers*, An Caris*, Koen Van Laer**

* UHasselt - Hasselt University, Faculty of Business Economics, Research Group Logistics (e-mail:
ilse.cretskens@uhasselt.be - katrien.ramaekers@uhasselt.be - an.caris@uhasselt.be)

** UHasselt – Hasselt University, Faculty of Business Economics, SEIN (e-mail:
koen.vanlaer@uhasselt.be)

Abstract: Although automation and digitalisation are ascending in warehouses, humans still play a crucial role in getting the job done. This study focuses on the underexposed angle of psychosocial aspects of human factors, with order pickers' well-being considered one of them. This study uses semi-structured interviews to understand how leadership affects warehouse employees' well-being. We see that most components of transformational and empowering leadership, the most potent predictors of employee well-being, are reflected in the data. However, we identify some additional essential leadership components not mentioned in the literature, like feeling respected and being treated equally compared to colleagues.

1. INTRODUCTION

A primary challenge for warehousing companies is finding and keeping qualified staff. 50% of the operating cost of warehouses comes from the order-picking process, which is often still manual (Ahmadi Keshavarz et al., 2021; Kovac & Djurdjevic, 2020; Tompkins et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2021). As Opengart et al. (2018) state, supply chains collapse without enough of the right people. However, warehouses are forced to handle many orders within tight time windows (Van Gils et al., 2018), which makes the order picking job demanding and unattractive. As a result, logistics and supply chain companies must compete to attract, hire and retain employees (Keller et al., 2020).

Although recent papers state that human workers remain essential in logistics processes (Sgarbossa et al., 2020; Winkelhaus et al., 2022), they mainly focus on optimising order-picking processes and increasing productivity and performance (Grosse et al., 2015). Meanwhile, little attention has gone to the human side. Therefore, Grosse et al. (2015) propose a conceptual framework for integrating human factors into order-picking planning models. They highlight the need for attention to psychosocial aspects consisting of non-physical dimensions. Job satisfaction, job demands and control, work monotony, motivation, work pressure, stress and workload, feedback and supervisory relations are included (Grosse et al., 2015). However, most research has been devoted to the physical human factors (De Lombaert et al., 2022), while only a few articles consider psychosocial factors in planning order-picking operations (Vanheusden et al., 2022). According to De Lombaert et al. (2022), future research should thoroughly explore the impacts of psychosocial conditions in an order-picking environment. That is why, in this study, our attention is focused on psychosocial human factors.

In the current research, we study psychosocial aspects by focusing on supervisory relations since, in our work-in-progress paper, we argue that leadership has a crucial impact on the well-being of order pickers (Cretskens et al., 2024). The latter paper reveals psychosocial factors impacting employee well-being in warehouses and points out leadership as crucial.

In this study, we intend to give insight into how leadership affects the employee well-being of order pickers as a psychosocial factor, using semi-structured interviews. We aim to contribute to the existing scientific literature in two ways:

1) By providing insights related to the impact of leadership on employee well-being in warehouses for future modelling.

2) By delivering managerial insights into how leadership can impact employee well-being among warehouse workers.

2. FOUNDATIONS OF THE STUDY

2.1 Employee well-being

In this study, we draw on the literature on well-being to examine the leader's impact on the employee well-being of order pickers. Warr (1987) describes employee well-being as 'the overall quality of an employee's experience and functioning at work'. In more recent literature, the concept has been approached from a three-dimensional perspective: the psychological dimension, the physical dimension and the social dimension (Grant et al., 2007; Guest, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

The psychological dimension includes subjective and psychological well-being. In organisations, subjective or hedonic well-being can be seen as job satisfaction. Psychological or eudaimonic well-being is related to fulfilling one's potential, finding meaning and purpose in work, and

engagement (Grant et al., 2007; Guest, 2017). The physical dimension approaches employee well-being from a physical and mental health perspective (Pagán-Castaño et al., 2020). The social dimension is about the relationships between, on one side, colleagues and, on the other side, employees and their supervisors.

The antecedents of employee well-being have been researched extensively in the literature on well-being. Our work-in-progress paper divides the antecedents into individual, organisational and interpersonal factors (Cretskens et al., 2024). Individual factors include elements like personality, gender, or emotional intelligence. The second cluster consists of antecedents on an organisational level, including work environment, job design and all aspects of human resources management. The cluster on interpersonal factors covers the interactions between colleagues and the interactions between the order pickers and their supervisors. The latter is the focus point of this study.

An important interpersonal antecedent is the opportunity for interpersonal contact, as Warr (1987) described in his vitamin model. When employees have the opportunity to interact and collaborate with colleagues, supervisors or management, this has a favourable impact on job satisfaction (Sirgy, 2013). Social support is one of the resources Bakker and Demerouti (2007) propose in their job demands-resources model. It includes support from co-workers as well as from the supervisor. Another essential interpersonal antecedent is supportive supervision. A worker's supervisor's input has long been crucial to job satisfaction (Warr, 2007). Multiple studies acknowledge the link between the leader's supportiveness and job satisfaction. Supervisors' empathy is one aspect of supportive supervision and impacts employees' work satisfaction (Sirgy, 2013). A boss's recognition for good work positively impacts employees' overall job satisfaction (Huang & Vliert, 2004). Having a high-quality relationship with the supervisor, having social support, or receiving feedback can prevent employees from getting burned out despite work overload and emotional and physical demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Abusive supervision negatively impacts overall job satisfaction and generates more job-related emotional exhaustion, anxiety and depression (Warr, 2007). At last, valued social position or status is a critical interpersonal antecedent to be discussed. This is one of the vitamins in Warr's model (Warr, 1987). Hackman and Oldham (1975) and many other researchers have found a meaningful correlation between task significance, the employees' assessment of the importance of their job, and overall job satisfaction.

The above description of the different aspects of employee well-being interpersonal antecedents shows the importance of the leader or supervisor on the work floor. Kuoppala et al. (2008) emphasise the need for more studies to clarify the relationship between leadership and employee well-being. That is why we focus in this study on the impact of leadership on the employee well-being of order pickers.

2.2 Leadership and employee well-being

Leadership has extensively been studied during the past decades and is defined in many ways. The definition adopted in this study is that "Leadership is a complex phenomenon that touches on many other important organisational, social and personal processes. It depends on a process of influence, whereby people are inspired to work towards group goals, not through coercion, but through personal motivation" (Bolden, 2004).

It has been shown that good leadership is linked with employee well-being (Kuoppala et al., 2008). Das and Pattanayak (2023) state that especially transformational and empowering leadership are the most potent predictors of employee well-being. Bass and Riggio (2006) describe transformational leadership as having four components: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, individualised consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Idealised influence indicates that transformational leaders behave in ways that allow them to serve as role models for their followers. They emphasise the importance of having a collective sense of mission. Inspirational motivation illustrates the motivational and inspiring behaviour of leaders and, in that way, provides meaning to their follower's work. Transformational leaders stimulate innovativeness and creativity, being indicated as intellectual stimulation. And at last, individual consideration indicates that transformational leaders act as coaches or mentors to meet each follower's needs for achievement and growth. Das and Pattanayak (2023) define transformational leadership by the following characteristics:

1) help employees meet their psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competency;

2) stimulate creativity;

3) achieve higher-order goals beyond self-interest.

Transformational leaders encourage autonomy by intellectually stimulating their employees. They meet employees' relatedness needs by being individually considerate and building strong, respectful relationships with their employees. Relatedness is also promoted by ideologically influencing employees through a shared vision. Finally, transformational leaders encourage employees to achieve higher goals through inspirational motivation (Das & Pattanayak, 2023).

Sharma and Kirkman (2015) define empowering leadership as leader behaviours directed at individuals or entire teams that consist of delegating authority to employees, promoting their self-directed and autonomous decision-making, coaching, sharing information, and asking for input. The concept consists of five essential behaviours: leading by example, informing, participative decision-making, coaching, and showing concern for subordinates (Arnold et al., 2000).

3. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study is based on forty-four in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in six Belgian logistics companies with a warehousing component.

While quantitative research dominates the logistics literature, Grosse et al. (2016) suggest a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews to examine human factors in logistics

processes. Semi-structured interviews help gain insight into the perceived reality of the order picker (Winkelhaus et al., 2022) and is, therefore, a suitable approach to understand in depth how leadership impacts order pickers' well-being at work.

The study took place in six Belgian logistics companies, which were selected through maximum variation sampling. In doing so, we looked for variations in potentially relevant characteristics like size, sector and origin of the company. The six organisations are active in different sectors like automotive, fashion, pharmaceutical, logistics, and servicing, varying from dozens of employees to thousands. Some are founded in Belgium, and others are a Belgian branch. We do not specify this information per company to ensure anonymity.

In each company, we interviewed at least five order pickers, one manager, and one person who was knowledgeable about the firm's well-being policy. The order pickers were, like the companies, sampled through maximum variation. Because of practical reasons, we did not select the interviewees ourselves but gave the human resources department a list of parameters for maximal variation, including age, seniority, gender, origin, contract type, and day/night shift. An overview of the forty-four interviewees can be found in Appendix A. The order pickers were not obliged to participate in this study and did not receive compensation. The collaborating companies were eager to have more insight related to the well-being of the order pickers and, therefore, had no incentive to propose only employees who were extremely positive about the company.

Forty-four semi-structured interviews of at least one hour took place on-site during working hours. The interviews were conducted using a tailor-made interview guide, which can be consulted on request by mail to the principal author. All the interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

This paper aligns best with the constructivist paradigm as we believe no single observable reality exists. This is in line with the suggestions of Darby et al. (2019) to not limit ourselves to the positivism paradigm, which dominates the discipline, but to expand the methodological toolbox of the field and include interpretive research methods.

4. FINDINGS

In this section, we elaborate on the results of the data analysis of the interviews. We focus on themes linked to the role of leadership in employee well-being. Our work-in-progress paper overviews individual, interpersonal and organisational antecedents of employee well-being (Cretskens et al., 2024). Within the cluster of interpersonal antecedents, our attention goes to those related to the interaction with the supervisor. Four relevant themes can be defined: the role of the team leader, informal contact, the relational aspect of equal treatment of order pickers, and appreciation from the supervisor. This study delves deeper into the leadership theme while linking it to the abovementioned elements. We use the characteristics of transformational and empowering leadership as a capstone, as discussed in section 2.2, and look for correspondences and differences in the interviews. That is how

we establish the link with the themes of the cluster of interpersonal antecedents. We refer to Appendix A to link the inserted quotes with the research sample.

4.1 Transformational leadership – Psychological needs

Transformational leaders help employees meet their psychological need of relatedness. In the interviews, relatedness frequently came up in different forms, highlighting the importance of friendliness, being approachable and informal contact. Order pickers in all companies emphasised the importance of the supervisor's friendliness towards the workers. We can see friendliness as an essential requirement to establish a connection between the order picker and the supervisor. The following quote by an order picker in firm A demonstrates the importance of friendliness.

We have a new supervisor, [...], he helps me. He is a great guy! He is friendly towards everyone who works here. He has much contact with us. There was much contact. The previous supervisor, [...], was also friendly. However, he had a lot less contact with his colleagues. But not this one. He always interacts with us. He comes towards us. Do you get it? (A5)

The approachability of a supervisor is important for the order pickers to stimulate their feeling of relatedness. It is crucial for the order pickers to feel that they can go to the supervisor to discuss a professional or private problem.

The informal contact between the order picker and the supervisor is linked to the psychological need relatedness, which transformational leaders try to achieve for their employees. The previous quote demonstrates the relevance of friendliness and informal contact. A supervisor stepping towards the order pickers and asking how they are doing and how their family is doing makes a huge difference in the working life of the order pickers. Those little questions seem banal but are not at all. The same goes for personal contacts, like a warehouse manager who calls the order pickers by their first name. However, taking the time for an informal chat can be challenging, as order pickers and team managers are experiencing constant time pressure.

4.2 Transformational leadership – Creativity

Transformational leadership is, amongst others, characterised by the stimulation of creativity. We do not see this appear in the interviews as an essential factor for well-being at the workplace. Proactivity and creativity were only raised as critical characteristics of an order picker in one interview with a warehouse manager. The same goes for autonomy, a psychological need that transformational leaders stimulate for their employees. Order pickers did not bring it up as an essential topic.

4.3 Transformational leadership – Higher order goals

Transformational leaders help to satisfy employees' need for competence by encouraging them to achieve higher goals and overcome obstacles to high performance (Das & Pattanayak, 2023). The order pickers appreciate that type of action, as is illustrated in the following quote of an order picker:

I heard from a team leader that there was a new guy, and he asked him: 'I have a 90% target; is that good?' And the team leader told him: 'For the first week, that is excellent!' That is how you motivate people. [...] If I hear something like that, I say: 'Perfect!'. I will continue to try to achieve more targets. (A3)

However, the interviews also show that other order pickers might ultimately get irritated when supervisors or management keep encouraging and giving new chances to certain employees in order to get their performance higher or their mistakes lower.

The team leader plays a crucial role in the context of warehouse workers' well-being. We can even say that they set an example as a role model. The interviews show us that in case of an incoming urgent order, the order pickers' actions depend on the team leader's approach. If the team leader starts helping and encourages the order pickers, they will also step up to get the order out on time. If the team leader stays at his desk and tells the order pickers to hurry up, they keep working at their average pace. Getting the order out on time, as a team, gives the order pickers a feeling of satisfaction and boosts the team spirit.

4.4 Empowering leadership – Leading by example

As described in the previous section, the team manager's behaviour impacts the order pickers' behaviour. This corresponds with the 'leading by example' characteristic of empowering leadership.

4.5 Empowering leadership – Informing

Informing your team is another characteristic of empowering leadership. An example of this is a short meeting at the start of the shift where the order pickers receive the necessary information. It makes them able to understand the goals of the firm better. The quote below demonstrates both points:

At the beginning of the shift, we always have a meeting. In each hall, it is like that. The tasks are distributed. And then he [supervisor] says: Guys, today is hectic! We do what we can. [...] And he [supervisor] helps us. (D4)

Order pickers appreciate being informed.

4.6 Empowering leadership – Participative decision-making

Participative decision-making is not a commonly used technique in warehouses. It did not appear once in the interviews as an existing way of working. Although the need for it was raised.

4.7 Empowering leadership – Coaching

If the supervisor or team manager approaches the order pickers in a coaching way, it depends on the personal style and on the training that the supervisor received. The order pickers indicate that they would appreciate a more coaching style:

What I miss is some guidance. [...] If you ask what you have to do, then they give you an answer. However, there is no coaching. That is, in fact, the right word. (B4)

The order picker would appreciate some tips and tricks on becoming more efficient or ergonomic.

This is, of course, also linked to the level of training that the team leader received and the level of experience. Many companies are aware of the need for leadership training and focus on it. Not only the higher management sees the need for this type of training, but also the order pickers recognise it:

Interviewer: Do you think the 'wrong' people sometimes become team leaders or supervisors?
Interviewee: I do not think the 'wrong' people, but rather people who cannot handle the power. Those people think that because they are higher in the hierarchy now, they have to show, you have to listen to me now. Our leader follows training often. Moreover, when someone becomes a team leader, they should get enough training! (D1)

4.8 Empowering leadership – Showing concern for subordinates

As informational leadership emphasises the importance of relatedness, empowering leadership stresses the relevance of showing concern for subordinates. The importance of this element was not only brought up by the order pickers but also by team leaders and supervisors. One of the supervisors formulated it as follows:

Our operations manager, [name operations manager], is one of the most understanding people I know. You can always count on him/her. Always. If he/she would fall away, I am also gone. Then I know nobody will ever be as good as [name operations manager]. (A6)

4.9 Additional elements

Transformational and empowering leadership are strong predictors of employee well-being. However, the interviews show other essential elements not specified by the two leadership styles but related to leadership and discussed in our work-in-progress paper (Cretskens et al., 2024).

The first one is the equal treatment of order pickers, highlighting that order pickers want to be approached by their superiors in the same way. For example, order pickers with permanent contracts sometimes felt that the temporary employees were handled more gently, leading to frustration.

In all the companies, the theme of appreciation is discussed in the context of employee well-being. Here, we focus on relational appreciation. The order pickers find it extremely important to receive some appreciation. This can be in the form of a 'thank you' or 'well done'. They also indicate that appreciation enhances their motivation.

Interviewer: We talked about many themes linked to well-being. Is there another topic you want to raise that is essential in this context?
Interviewee: Motivate people more. The small things I talked about: 'Well done, people!', 'Thank you!'. These are only words, but they motivate people a lot. That is needed and should occur more. (D1)

A last additional element is respect. For some of the companies in the sample, one of their cultural values is 'respect'. This is a good thing as this theme has been raised by the order pickers in all the companies. They emphasise the importance of respectful communication, as you can read in the following quote, and indicate it as a prerequisite for employee well-being:

Interviewer: What is crucial for you if you think about employee well-being?
Interviewee: That we should be respected.
Interviewer: And is this currently the case?
Interviewee: Yes and no.
Interviewer: How do you mean?
Interviewee: Like today, we had a good start to the day. This means that we can work more at ease. The pressure is less. However, there are also periods when we have a bad day start. Then they start saying: 'We have to begin, let us begin! Come on!' And then I think, let's calm down. [...] (C1)

Treating each other respectfully also means having a relationship where giving and taking are balanced. This applies to the aspect of flexibility. Flexibility can be asked of the order pickers and can be given to them. Often, there is some negotiation between order pickers doing overtime and having their leave days granted easily by the supervisor. If both parties show flexibility, the relationship between the order picker and the supervisor benefits.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study shows us the relevance of leadership in the context of order pickers' well-being at work. Many factors that define transformational and empowering leadership are reflected in the interviews. However, some new elements that are not strongly stressed in the literature were found in the interviews to be essential. For instance, flexibility that works in two directions and being treated respectfully as an order picker. These insights can help warehousing companies in their struggle to find qualified personnel and keep them on board and motivated.

For future research, it would be interesting to perform a case study in one or two companies to go into more depth on the leadership styles and their impact. This case study can include extra interviews with supervisors and management, team observations, and analysis of available documents on the company's culture, values and leadership vision.

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	B7	HR manager
	B8	Prevention manager
Firm C	C1-C5	Order picker
	C6	HR/Warehouse manager
Firm D	D1-D5	Order picker
	D6	HR manager
	D7	Operations manager
Firm E	E1-E8	Order picker
	E9	Operations Manager
	E10	HR manager
Firm F	F1-F5	Order picker
	F6	HR manager
	F7	Operations Manager

Appendix A. RESEARCH SAMPLE

Firm	Participant	Function
Firm A	A1-A5	Order picker
	A6	Supervisor
	A7	HR team member
Firm B	B1-B5	Order picker
	B6	Warehouse manager