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## Article

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## **Supervisor's behavioral complexity: Ineffective in the call center**

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### ***Abstract***

An ample repertoire of leadership behaviors available to the manager is expected to guarantee his/her effectiveness transcending situations, but research in the call-center context has identified a specific form of effective supervision: people-oriented leadership. The purpose of this paper is to compare the effectiveness of leader behavioral complexity vis-à-vis people-oriented supervision. 268 employees out of 728 of a Peruvian call center filled in an on-line survey that included, among other questionnaires, the Competing Values Framework Managerial Behavior Instrument in reference to their front-line supervisor. The study analyzed the relationships between supervisory leadership and subordinate turnover intention and absenteeism. Behavioral complexity, like people-oriented leadership, predicted subordinate turnover intention but did not predict subordinate absenteeism, which people-oriented leadership did when other leadership orientations (to change, results, processes) were held constant. Our explanations consider that absenteeism is a concrete behavior and turnover intention an abstract attitude. The findings are consistent with the call-center literature, suggest important boundaries to the concept of manager behavioral complexity, and highlight the need for contingency theories of leadership effectiveness.

**Keywords:** leader behavioral complexity, people-oriented leadership, absenteeism, competing values framework

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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Managerial leadership - the process whereby managers influence the behavior of their subordinates - is regarded as effective when it leads to the achievement of organizational goals. Two types of leadership effectiveness models are found in the managerial literature: one-size-fits-all models and situational models. Whereas the former propose specific forms of leadership as solutions for any organizational situation, the latter assume that a form of leadership may be effective in some situations and ineffective in others. The research gap identified in this article is the absence of empirical challenges to a recently proposed one-size-fits-all model of managerial leadership. The study presented addresses the gap by identifying in the organizational literature a specific context which seems to call for only part of the proposed model – a part which is relevant to the situation - and tests the effectiveness of the proposed model, in whole and in part, in that organizational context.

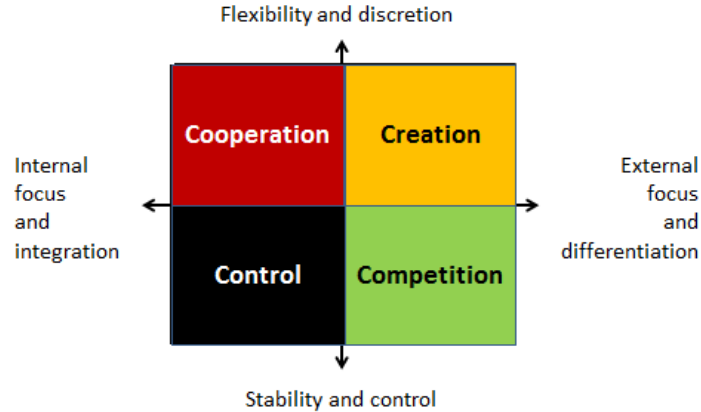
### **1.1 Leader behavioral complexity and Hypothesis 1**

One-size-fits-all models of leadership effectiveness have prevailed in research on managerial leadership in recent decades (Bryman, Collinson, Grint, Jackson, & Uhl-Bien, 2011). Using transformational leadership, the manager convinces his/her personnel to transcend their self-interest for the sake of the organization while elevating employees' needs from concerns for safety and security to concerns for achievement and self-actualization. The transformational leader gives subordinates autonomy over specific jobs, training and tools to succeed, and authority to make decisions, and serves as an empathetic role model who inspires them to achieve remarkable results. In transactional leadership, the leader promotes compliance by followers through rewards and punishments. With transactional leadership, the manager emphasizes extrinsic rewards and motivates subordinates through contractual agreements to pursue organizational goals while workplace anxiety is minimized and follower self-interest is fulfilled. Whereas the transformational leader shows that old patterns are ineffective and works to change the system, the transactional leader solves challenges by fitting experiences to a known pattern and works within the system. Whereas the former wants to know what has to change, the latter wants to know the step-by-step approach. Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory focuses in the dyadic leader-member relationship. It is a combination of the two previously described models which begins as transactional exchange and evolves into transformational exchange. Research motivated by these models has achieved a high degree of theoretical sophistication (e.g., Kimura, 2012; Li, Furst-Holloway, Gales, Masterson, & Blume, 2017; Mao, Chiang, & Gao, 2017), but a major problem with one-size-fits-all theories is that they do not specify the generalized impacts of situational and context variables that may influence leadership effectiveness (Yukl, 2011; see also House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004).

An original twist of the one-size-fits-all approach to leadership effectiveness is brought by the concept of leader behavioral complexity, which recognizes that specific types of leadership are required by specific types of situations and yet assumes the existence of a leadership trait which would assure effectiveness across situations. The theory is based on the Competing Values Framework (CVF), a model of organizational cultures (Cameron, Quinn, DeGraff, & Thakor, 2006; Hartnell, Ou, & Kinicki, 2011; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983). The CVF consists in the orthogonal crossing of a structural factor of stability and control versus flexibility and discretion and a focus factor of internal orientation and integration of persons versus external orientation and differentiation of persons. The crossing originates four types of organizations (see Figure 1). The CVF guides the specification of leadership roles according to mutually exclusive values which define the behavioral breadth with which a manager might act (Quinn, Spreitzer, & Hart, 1992). One of the pairs of opposed values or capabilities contrasts priorities of relationships versus results (internal- versus external-orientation axis). The second pair contrasts behaviors that create continuity versus change (stability versus flexibility axis). Because opposing quadrants are viewed as mutually exclusive, their coexistence in an individual manager presents a paradox. The CVF emphasizes the inherent difficulty of addressing competing demands and gives a theoretical structure to the requisite behaviors for satisfying each quadrant's demands. People-, change-, results-, and process-oriented leadership, respectively, would be required by the cooperation, creation, competition, and control cultures of the CVF (Lawrence, Lenk, & Quinn, 2009). However, there would be a trait that permits the leader to perform adequately *across* CVF quadrants. Behavioral complexity is defined as the capacity of a given leader to engage in a wide repertoire of behaviors (Hooijberg & Quinn, 1992). More precisely, behavioral complexity is "the ability to exhibit contrary or opposing behaviors (as appropriate or necessary) while still retaining some measure of integrity, credibility, and direction" (Denison, Hooijberg, & Quinn, 1995, p. 526). The concept of behavioral complexity implies that

it is possible for a leader to transcend the CVF paradoxes. A behaviorally complex leader would both maintain continuity and lead change; likewise, a behaviorally complex leader would transcend the paradox of results versus relationships.

**Figure 1: The four cultures of the Competing Values Framework**



Lawrence et al. (2009) developed the 36-item CVF Managerial Behavior Instrument (CVFMBI) and reported significant correlations between behavioral complexity and the job performance of 407 managers of an international service firm operating in diverse countries around the globe. Their results were based on self-ratings and ratings from supervisors, subordinates, peers, and internal customers and were cross-validated among 123 participants entering an elite executive MBA course in North America. Perceived behavioral complexity has also been found related to the internal and external effectiveness of non-governmental organizations in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Mussallam, 2011). On the other hand, in a state university in Turkey, the strongest predictor of faculty leadership effectiveness was the create leadership function (Akbulut, Seggie, & Börkan, 2015) and Robinson (2016) has reported that behavioral complexity does not operate according to theoretical expectations in virtual environments.

The literature has not addressed the effectiveness of managers' behavioral complexity in an organizational context in which research suggests that non-complex leader behaviors are needed, as is the case of the call center. Moreover, the outcomes of the behavioral complexity variable have been assessed considering achievements of the manager, not in terms of specific subordinate behaviors which hinder organizational effectiveness, such as worker absenteeism. In the research presented in this article we evaluate in a specific organizational context - that of the call center - the validity evidences related to the predictive capabilities of the behavioral complexity concept.

*Hypothesis 1. Call center supervisor's behavioral complexity is associated with reduced turnover intention and absenteeism of call center personnel.*

Turnover and absenteeism are forms of withdrawal behaviors in organizations which also include lateness. Whereas movement ease and desirability were the mechanisms which explained turnover in March and Simon's (1958) highly formalized model, Mobley (1977) conceived elaborate mechanisms linking affects, mainly job satisfaction, to quits. More recently, Hom, Mitchell, Lee, & Griffeth (2012) have focused on proximal withdrawal states derived from desired employment status (whether employees want to stay or leave) and perceived volitional control (whether quit or stay decisions are completely up to them or at least partially under external regulation); as a result, enthusiastic leavers and stayers and reluctant leavers and stayers can be identified. It has been shown that the strongest determinants of employee turnover are job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job search, comparison of alternatives, withdrawal cognitions, and quit intentions (Griffeth, Hom, & Gartner, 2000). Effective leaders reduce employees' turnover intentions (Elci, Sener, Aksoy, & Alpkan, 2012), apparently because leadership behavior and leader-follower relationships are significant determinants of stress and burnout in subordinates (Harms, Credé, Tynan, Leon, & Jeung, 2017). As for absenteeism, researchers early noticed the fact that it is more frequent among women

than men, which they attributed to the demands of being a wife and mother, and identified also other objective sources, such as transportation problems (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982). The main focus, however, has been on its relationships with job attitudes, mainly job satisfaction (e.g., Hackett, 1989). For example, in a study which controlled for very detailed demographic, job, and firm characteristics (including workplace practices), dissatisfaction with contracted hours was shown to be a significant determinant of absence (Dionne & Dostie, 2007). Different leadership styles are associated with differing levels of employee absenteeism (Elshout, Scherp, E., & van der Feltz-Cornelis, 2013), but an encompassing theory of the relationship between the two variables is lacking. Thus, the research has targeted isolated determinants (e.g., Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009).

### **1.2 The call center context and hypothesis 2 and 3**

By the end of the past century, the call center servicing clients was a new form of work organization which grew rapidly thanks to the combination of improved computer technology and reduced telecommunications costs. Whereas in-house call centers are a specific unit within a larger organization focusing on other core business (manufacturing, retail, etc.), outsourced call centers are run by firms that specialize in providing inbound and outbound communication services. In the call center, client service representatives (CSRs) are expected to meet certain standards regarding the time they take to call a client and/or resolve a client's query, which includes a talking-time and a holding-time, and provide a solution to the client at first call. In each call, the CSR must ensure not only that the customer's inquire is correctly answered but also that he/she is speaking to a known customer and the details of the call are correctly captured in the system. Call centers use standardized procedures and processes based on information technology software such as implementing recorded messages, letting the customer interact with the information system via telephone keys, and enabling two-way communication between the computer and the customer using synthetic speech messages (Schalk & van Rijckevorsel, 2007). High levels of stress amongst CSRs are a common feature because the work tasks and the interactions with customers impose role overload and role conflict (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Kleemann & Matuschek, 2002; Singh, Goolsby, & Rhoads, 1994; Witt, Andrews, & Carlson, 2004). Wegge, van Dick, Fisher, West, and Dawson (2006) described the specific challenges posed by the organization of work (working in shifts, postures, computer malfunctioning, high noise level) and divided attention consuming demands (listening and speaking, inputting data and reading from the screen). Role conflict arises from the demands to be quick and simultaneously provide a service of high quality; hence, customer satisfaction and customer throughput often collide. Conflict also arises between the negative emotions that surge when a customer has a complaint and the obligation to express positive feelings (Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002, 2010; Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004; Marcoux, 2012). In addition, the intensity of automated performance monitoring increases emotional labor (Holman, Chissick, & Totterdell, 2002) and its perceived purpose affects job satisfaction (Welles, Moorman, & Werner, 2007). Thus, it is the rule to find high levels of lateness, absenteeism and turnover in the call center industry (Hutchinson, Purcell, & Kinnie, 2000; Kleemann & Matuschek, 2002; Malhotra & Mukherjee, 2004; Rose, 2002; Schalk & van Rijckevorsel, 2007); and psychological and physical symptoms frequently mediate the job strain-absence connection (Darr & Johns, 2008). On the other hand, the relationship between emotional labor and job performance is not simple (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011) and adaptive performance yields higher overall performance in call centers (Shoss, Witt, & Vera, 2011).

The history of call centers suggests a quest for the adequate leadership style. Early research focused on the coercive employment systems that were adopted by call centers (Kinnie, Hutchinson, & Purcell, 2000); these were characterized as an 'assembly line in the head' (Taylor & Bain, 1999) and likened to a 'panopticon' that controlled virtually every aspect of employee behavior (Ferne & Metcalf, 1998). During a time, call centers seemed obsessed with control. Yet, along with organizations that emphasized a mass production model typified by a set of repetitive, routinized and highly scripted tasks, call centers characterized by a professional service model that maximized the discretion and autonomy of the employees emerged (Batt & Moynihan, 2002). Since then a number of studies have supported the benefits accruing from the implementation of high commitment management practices (see Clark, 2007; D'Cruz & Noronha, 2011; Harney & Jordan, 2008; Malhotra & Mukherjee, 2007; Schalk and Van Rijckevorsel, 2007; Schawfeli, Bakker, & van Reenen, 2009) coupled with the creation of state-of-the-art workplaces seeking to communicate 'people values' in mass-production call centers (Barnes, 2007). Using a nationally representative sample of call centers in the USA, Batt (2002) found that quit rates were lower in establishments that emphasized employee participation in decision making and in teams. Supervisor coaching (Liu & Batt, 2010) and support (Liaw, Chi, & Chuang, 2010) positively influence employee performance in

call centers and supervisor support moderates in a complex way the relationship between call center worker burnout and his/her turnover intention (Choi, Cheong, & Feinberg, 2012). Finally, research has demonstrated the importance of the employee's psychological contract with the supervisor as different from the psychological contract with the call center (Chambel, 2012) and that employee emotional exhaustion relates negatively to his/her perception of the supervisor among permanent but not temporary call center workers (Van der Elst, Van den Broeck, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2014).

Hence, in the CVF perspective, what seems to be the supervisory style adequate for call centers is person-oriented leadership, that is, one that motivates people by tending to their emotional needs. Since the call center literature suggests that people-oriented leadership is the relevant supervisory variable in this industry, the present study tested:

*Hypothesis 2. Call center supervisor's people-oriented leadership is associated with reduced subordinate's turnover intention and absenteeism.*

Lawrence et al. (2009) postulated the effectiveness of leader behavioral complexity across situations. Since behavioral complexity is implicitly defined as a sum of people-oriented leadership and other leadership orientations, it can be assumed that part of the variance of people-oriented leadership is shared with the other leadership orientations (non-specific people-oriented leadership) whereas another part is not (specific people-oriented leadership). Thus, we tested:

*Hypothesis 3. Call center supervisor's specific people-oriented leadership is associated with reduced subordinate's turnover intention and absenteeism.*

## **2 METHODS**

### **2.1 Organizational context**

The organization studied (Org) is part of an international service conglomerate that ranks second in the world and has 15% of the Latin American market of call centers. Org has operated in Peru during more than 10 years providing employment for more than 5,000 workers in Metropolitan Lima. These are divided into a Foreign Mobiles division dedicated to attend a foreign phone company and a division that has clients in various fields (banking, insurance, government, etc.). The Foreign Mobiles division has an average absenteeism of 7.9% which represents a loss of 5.5% of its income. The majority of employees at Org are women; with few country exceptions, women prevail in call centers across nations (Holman, Batt, & Holtgrewe, 2007).

### **2.2 Participants**

The 728 CSRs of Org's Foreign Mobiles division were invited to participate in an online survey. All of them had responsibilities entailing calling clients and responding to them. Their employee ID served to link their responses to their personal and work data in personnel files.

### **2.3 Measures**

#### **2.3.1 Absenteeism**

Org measures its employees' absenteeism using an attendance marker, vacations control, and administration of medical dispenses. The indicator refers to uncertified absence. Whereas lateness is counted in hours and minutes, absenteeism is measured in days.

#### **2.3.2 Turnover intention**

The following items were translated into Spanish by Alarco (2010): "Lately, I have many wishes to abandon this organization", "Despite the obligations I have with this enterprise, I want to abandon my job", "I would like to remain in this organization as long as I could" (inverse scoring), and "If I could, I would leave this job today". Respondents used a five-point Likert scale.

#### **2.3.3 Behavioral complexity and its components**

Lawrence et al. (2009)'s analyses of the CVFMBI items yielded four factors that matched the four CVF quadrants and, in turn, were defined by three sub-factors each. Encouraging participation, developing people, and acknowledging personal needs define the people-oriented leadership called for by the cooperation culture.

Anticipating customer needs, initiating significant change, and inspiring people to exceed expectations define the change-oriented leadership required by the creation culture. Focusing on competition, showing a hard work ethic, and emphasizing speed define the results-oriented leadership required by the competition culture. And clarifying policies, expecting accurate work, and controlling projects define the process-oriented leadership required by the control culture. A Spanish version of the CVFMBI was obtained for this research through forward-back translation of its 36 items, at the rate of 9 items per leadership orientation.

### **2.3.4 Other Variables**

Other variables measured included gender (1 = female, 2 = male), age, education (1= secondary, 2 = university), number of children, number of hours worked per day by each employee, employee's time at Org, and working shift (1 = morning; 2 = afternoon/night).

Table 1 summarizes the measures employed in the study.

### **2.4 Analytic strategy**

Confirmatory factor analysis was applied to obtain validity evidences related to the internal structure of the CVFMBI, the Lavaan (2012) package in R (R Core Team, 2015) being the analytic tool. Absence data in Org were highly skewed to the right and not normally distributed. The five leadership measurement scales were non-normal, too. Hence, we used bootstrapping with 1,000 samples in the analyses.

**Table 1: Measures used in the study**

| Measure               | Definition                       | Source                 | Number of items | Cases |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|-------|
| Absenteeism           | Uncertified absences             | Target organization    | 1               | 728   |
| Turnover intention    | Desire to quit                   | Alarco (2010)          | 4               | 268   |
| Behavioral complexity | Sum of four leader orientations  | Lawrence et al. (2009) | 36              | 379   |
| Person-orientation    | Focus on personnel welfare       | Lawrence et al. (2009) | 9               | 379   |
| Change-orientation    | Focus on adaptation and creation | Lawrence et al. (2009) | 9               | 379   |
| Results-orientation   | Focus on outcomes                | Lawrence et al. (2009) | 9               | 379   |
| Process-orientation   | Focus on tasks                   | Lawrence et al. (2009) | 9               | 379   |
| Gender                | Male or female                   | Own                    | 1               | 379   |
| Age                   | Years lived                      | Own                    | 1               | 379   |
| Education             | Secondary, university            | Own                    | 1               | 379   |
| Number of children    | Quantity                         | Own                    | 1               | 379   |
| Hours worked          | Number of hours                  | Own                    | 1               | 379   |
| Time in Org           | Months                           | Own                    | 1               | 379   |
| Work shift            | Morning, afternoon/night         | Own                    | 1               | 379   |

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations**

| Variable                | Mean  | SD    | 1       | 2      | 3     | 4     | 5      | 6       | 7    | 8      | 9      | 10     | 11     | 12     | 13   | 14 |
|-------------------------|-------|-------|---------|--------|-------|-------|--------|---------|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------|----|
| 1 Gender                | 1.352 | 0.478 | -       |        |       |       |        |         |      |        |        |        |        |        |      |    |
| 2 Age (years)           | 24.01 | 7.089 | -.05    | -      |       |       |        |         |      |        |        |        |        |        |      |    |
| 3 Educational level     | 1.100 | 0.304 | .06     | .06    | -     |       |        |         |      |        |        |        |        |        |      |    |
| 4 Number of children    | 0.390 | 0.720 | -.20*** | .47*** | .16** | -     |        |         |      |        |        |        |        |        |      |    |
| 5 Hours worked          | 7.839 | 1.833 | -.05    | .15**  | .03   | .06   | -      |         |      |        |        |        |        |        |      |    |
| 6 Time in Org (months)  | 14.26 | 7.417 | -.10    | .27*** | .02   | .15** | .08    | -       |      |        |        |        |        |        |      |    |
| 7 Working shift         | 1.500 | 0.500 | .13*    | -.07   | .03   | -.10* | -.01   | .01     | -    |        |        |        |        |        |      |    |
| 8 Behavioral complexity | 140.5 | 27.87 | -.03    | -.03   | -.06  | .02   | -.08   | -.11*   | -.07 | -      |        |        |        |        |      |    |
| 9 People orientation    | 34.43 | 7.874 | -.06    | -.02   | -.10  | -.00  | -.13*  | -.12*   | -.09 | .92*** | -      |        |        |        |      |    |
| 10 Change orientation   | 34.56 | 7.372 | -.03    | -.03   | -.06  | .03   | -.07   | -.12*   | -.08 | .95*** | .86*** | -      |        |        |      |    |
| 11 Process orientation  | 35.90 | 7.402 | -.02    | -.02   | -.04  | .03   | -.04   | -.08    | -.04 | .95*** | .79*** | .89*** | -      |        |      |    |
| 12 Results orientation  | 35.65 | 7.187 | .03     | -.06   | -.01  | .01   | -.05   | -.10*   | -.06 | .92*** | .76*** | .81*** | .88*** | -      |      |    |
| 13 Absenteeism          | 0.043 | 0.040 | .02     | -.11*  | .08   | .07   | -.15** | -.25*** | .01  | -.02   | -.06   | -.00   | -.01   | -.01   | -    |    |
| 14 Turnover intention   | 9.26  | 3.29  | .04     | -.02   | .18** | -.03  | -.03   | .23***  | .13* | -.17** | -.19** | -.15*  | -.13*  | -.18** | -.01 | -  |

Note:  $N = 379$  for variables 1-12,  $N = 728$  for variable 13,  $N = 268$  for variable 14

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



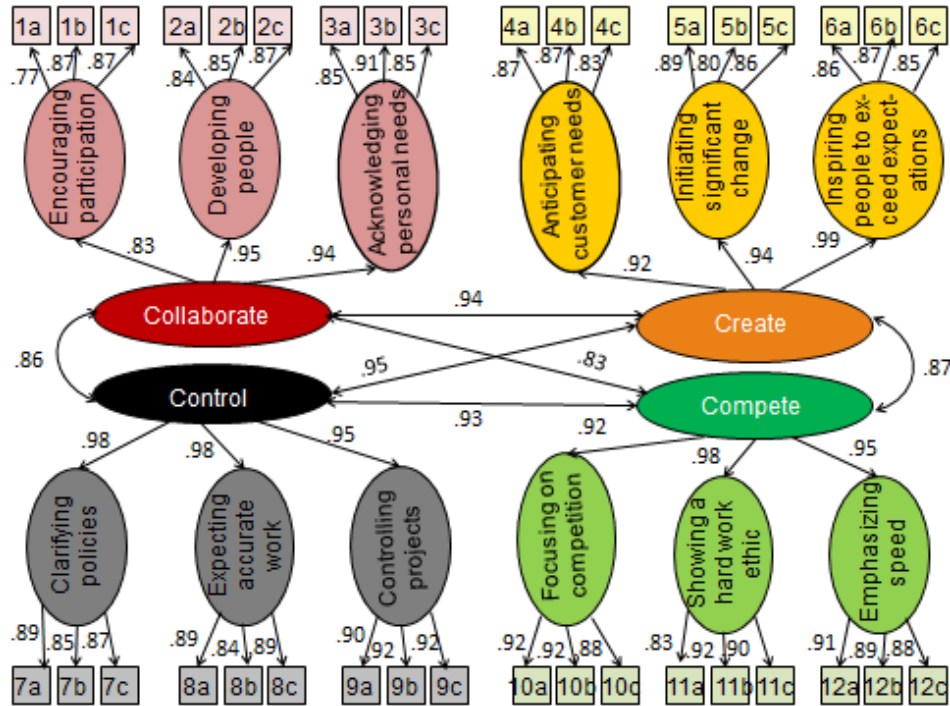
### 3 RESULTS

#### 3.1 Preliminary analyses

All of the 728 CSRs had information on absenteeism, 379 filled-in the CVFMBI in full, and 268 completed the turnover questionnaire, which reflects the order of presentation of the topics in the questionnaires. Hence, the response rate for all the questionnaires was only 37%. SCRs who did not respond to the CVFMBI (Non-responders) presented greater absenteeism (Mean = .0494) than responders (Mean = .0427), a significant difference ( $t = -2.118, p = .035$ ). Similarly, non-responders to the employability and turnover sections of the questionnaire presented greater absenteeism (Mean = .052) than responders (Mean = .038), a significant difference ( $t = -2.515, p = .013$ ). The internal-consistency reliability of the CVFMBI ranged from .94 to .97 across leadership orientations, whereas the  $\alpha$  for the total scale was .98. The internal-consistency reliability of the turnover intention scale reached .78.

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations between study variables. A majority of the employees were women (65%), average age was 24 years, 10% of the personnel had some university education, few had children (0.39 children was the average), and the mean number of hours worked per day was 7.84. The mean SCRs' 14.26 months with Org (Median = 12 months) reveals a huge level of turnover. All the leadership scores were highly inter-correlated and did not importantly correlate with the other variables, except negatively with turnover intention. It can be seen that absenteeism negatively correlates with age, number of hours worked, and time in Org, whereas turnover intention increases with education, time in Org, and in the abnormal (afternoon and night) shifts. Education positively influences employability. We replicated Lawrence et al.'s (2009) hierarchical confirmatory factor analysis (Figure 2), which sought to render three first-order factors and four second-order factors. The indicators of model adjustment were good (Tucker-Lewis Index = 0.965) or very good (RMSEA = 0.018; SRMR = 0.028) according to conventional standards (Schreiber, Stage, King, Notra, & Barlow, 2006).

**Figure 2: Replication of Lawrence et al.'s (2009) factor analysis. The names of the second-order factors used by Lawrence et al. correspond to people-, change-, results-, and process-oriented leadership**



**Table 3: Standardized coefficients from the regression of turnover intentions and absenteeism on raw leadership scores and other study variables, per regression model**

| Predictors                    | Turnover Intention |         |         | Absenteeism |         |         |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|---------|---------|-------------|---------|---------|
|                               | Model 1            | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 1     | Model 2 | Model 3 |
| Leader behavioral complexity  | -.14*              |         |         | -.06        |         |         |
| Person-oriented leadership    |                    | -.15*   | -.11    |             | -.10*   | -.24**  |
| Other leadership orientations |                    |         | -.04    |             |         | .15     |
| Gender                        | .02                | .01     | .02     | -.01        | .01     | .02     |
| Age                           | -.06               | -.05    | -.05    | -.10        | -.10    | -.09    |
| Educational level             | .20*               | .19*    | .20**   | .09         | .09     | .08     |
| Number of children            | -.04               | -.05    | -.04    | .14*        | .14*    | .13     |
| Hours worked                  | -.06               | -.07    | -.07    | -.14*       | -.15*   | -.15**  |
| Time in Org                   | .27**              | .26**   | .27**   | -.22**      | -.23**  | -.23**  |
| Working shift                 | .12*               | .12*    | .12*    | .01         | .01     | .00     |
| Corrected R <sup>2</sup>      | .11                | .11     | .11     | .08         | .09     | .09     |
| ANOVA F                       | 5.05***            | 5.09*** | 4.52*** | 4.93***     | 5.29*** | 5.02*** |
| (N)                           | (268)              | (268)   | (268)   | (379)       | (379)   | (379)   |

*Note.* The number of variables in this table is not 14, as in tables 1 and 2, because change-oriented, results-oriented, and process-oriented leadership are part of Other leadership orientations.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  (after bootstrapping).

### 3.2 Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis 1 was upheld only in part. The results shown in Table 2 indicate that supervisor's behavioral complexity is associated with subordinate's turnover intention but not with absenteeism. In contrast, Hypothesis 2 was fully upheld: person-oriented leadership is associated with both variables. In turn, the regression coefficients stemming from the model into which both person-oriented leadership and the sum of the three other leadership orientations were entered supported Hypothesis 3 regarding absenteeism. Whereas both variables failed to reach significance in the prediction of turnover, person-oriented leadership achieved significance predicting absenteeism. This strongly suggests that turnover intention is affected by what person-oriented leadership and the other three leadership orientations have in common while absenteeism is affected by something that is specific to person-oriented leadership. Paradoxically, time in Org was associated with increased turnover intention and decreased absenteeism. On the other hand, whereas education and working shift affected turnover intention, the number of hours worked affected absenteeism.

## 4 DISCUSSION

The main finding of the study is that what is specific to people-oriented leadership predicts the absenteeism of call-center employees, a subordinate behavior with important financial implications for call centers. The findings strongly suggest that, at least in the call-center context and at the front-line supervisory level, the leader behavioral complexity is irrelevant to achieve a positive, corrective influence on employee absenteeism. In deciding whether to attend or not, the worker probably weights the consequences of two behavioral options: to attend or not to attend, the option to attend being probably more attractive, i.e., positively charged in affective terms, to the extent that the work climate is defined by a people-oriented supervisor who reduces the stress associated with the CSR's tasks. Whether the supervisor is oriented to change, results, or processes may be irrelevant to this decisional context. Behavioral complexity may be useful in other types of organizations. There are organizations with inherent complexity. To perform on a superior performance level, companies must respond with internal complexity to extant external complexities; thus Schott, Horstmann, and Bodendorff (2015) have identified 37 complexity drivers that determine corporate complexity and a number of complexity management methods. A leader with high behavioral complexity may be required by a complex organization, but this does not appear to be the case of call centers, at least at the service platform level.

But, why leader behavioral complexity, which failed to predict absenteeism, predicted turnover intention? A number of studies have shown that the two withdrawal behaviors are differently related to organizational variables (e.g., Cohen & Golan, 2007). Turnover is more easily predictable than absenteeism from Fishbein's attitude-behavior model (Newman, 1974), which suggests that the former responds to principles of rationality to a greater extent than the latter. Thus, research findings from a field study concerned with perceived inequity within organizations led Geurts, Schaufeli, and Rutte (1999, p. 263) to the conclusion that "reporting sick is a rather uncomplicated way of coping immediately with an inequitable situation, whereas developing thoughts about leaving the organization involves a long-term process of re-evaluating one's attachment to the organization, gaining emotional distance and making a major decision to actually leave." Similarly, Albion, Fogarty, Machin, and Patrick (2008) reported from a study of 1097 hospital employees that psychological states mediated the relationship between organizational climate and intention to leave but not the relationship between organizational climate and absenteeism. In call centers, job demands are the most important predictors of absenteeism, through their relationship with exhaustion and health problems, whereas job resources are the most important predictors of turnover intention, through their relation with organizational commitment and dedication (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003). The main difference between these two variables is that one constitutes a concrete behavior and the other an abstract attitude. In responding the questions on job turnover, the employee must make an effort of abstraction of the attributes of the organization. How is this judgment affected by the supervisor's behavioral complexity? Discounting people-oriented leadership, behavioral complexity appears to basically refer to a preoccupation of the supervisor with getting the core tasks done. We surmise that, if the supervisor emphasizes aspects of the job in his/her daily behavior, they become salient at the moment of producing a judgment on the value of the evaluated organization. The call-center employee under a supervisor with high behavioral complexity may come to recognize that his/her core tasks are important. Call centers offer low-wage, low skill jobs that attract mainly women and youngsters (Holman, Batt, & Holtgrewe, 2007). Behaviorally complex supervisors may have a positive impact on the call-center employee's identity as a worker who performs valued tasks. This may lift their self-esteem as workers and the value of being part of the organization. Whereas these interpretive hypotheses are highly speculative, they are testable.

#### **4.1 Theoretical and practical contributions**

Situational leadership theories, which propose that effective management requires a specific leadership style for a specific type of situation are out of fashion. Hershey and Blanchard (1969), addressing the traditional leadership concepts of “initiating structure” and “consideration” (Hemphill & Coons, 1957), postulated that some situations require of the leader to prioritize defining the role for followers, giving definite instructions, creating organizational patterns, and establishing formal channels of communication, while other situations require more emphasis on the display of concern for others, attempts to reduce emotional conflicts, efforts to seek harmonious relations, and effective regulation of equal participation. The level of professional and psychological maturity of employees would determine the correct leadership style. This theory’s empirical failures (Bass, 2008; Thompson & Vechio, 2009) have led to stagnation of research on situational leadership effectiveness. Nonetheless, the consideration and initiating structure concepts and the situational approach have in some way re-emerged as part of the CVF and our findings, demonstrating the relevance of call center supervisor’s people-oriented leadership, have the potential to revitalize situational approaches to leadership effectiveness.

The study results indicate boundary conditions for the concept of behavioral complexity. It has been shown in Romania that a single managerial competency, team management, is relevant to managerial performance among line managers, whereas a number of competencies are relevant to middle and top management performance (Bucur, 2013). Since this suggests that leader behavioral complexity may be less relevant at lower management levels, front-line supervisors may not need behavioral complexity at all in order to affect subordinate absenteeism.

Call centers can learn some lessons from our findings. Absenteeism was the first problem in the list of top headaches for call center management according to a recent survey (ICMI, 2012) and the solutions suggested included offering a buy-back program for unused sick-days, move pay-days from Friday to Monday, bring agents into the planning process to ensure that they understand what the service level goals are and reach them, and others; supervision oriented to improve worker emotional status was not mentioned. If people-oriented leadership reduces subordinate absenteeism, it should be promoted through recognition and strengthened through training.

#### **4.2 Limitations and future research**

The main limitation of this study is its poor questionnaire response rate. Only 37% of the SCRs of the Foreign Mobiles division responded to the study questionnaire in full. Moreover, non-responders presented greater absenteeism than non-responders; this suggests that it is possible that more clear-cut, sharper results confirming the trends observed would have been obtained from a more representative sample. A second limitation is that job stress was assumed to moderate the relationship between people-oriented leadership and employee’s absenteeism but was not measured in the study. The implicit tenet is that people-oriented supervision would not be equally successful in preventing absenteeism in the absence of job stress. While this type of situation may be impossible to observe in call centers, individual differences in job stress and burnout can be observed to test whether these variables, in fact, moderate the relationship between person-oriented leadership and worker absenteeism. There is evidence that personality variables, especially Neuroticism, determine individual differences in the extent to which persons respond to stressful labor (e.g., Kokkinos, 2007; McManus, Keeling, & Paice, 2004). Testing the hypotheses in a different organizational setting may be needed to strengthen the generalizability of the findings; for example, the study could be replicated in the garment industry, where high levels of stress are present (e.g., Ganster, Kiersch, Marsh, & Bowen, 2011; Steinisch, Yusuf, Li, Rahman, Ashraf, Strümpell, Fishcer, & Loerbroks, 2013). The study also leaves open other questions. Is call center supervisor’s people-oriented leadership relevant in other areas beyond absenteeism? It appears likely that it may also ameliorate lateness and turnover but, does it promote a work of better quality? The literature suggests that it does, but this has not yet been demonstrated using the people-oriented leadership scale of the CVFMBI. Research is needed also to establish the specific levels of management at which the behavioral complexity concept may be relevant; different levels of behavioral complexity may be required at different levels of management considering the diverse number of competencies that are relevant to low, middle and top managerial positions (Bucur, 2013).

#### **4.3 Conclusion**

The findings reported in this article significantly advance our understanding of leadership processes in organizations. Important boundaries were demonstrated with respect to the theory that leader behavioral complexity is good for all organizational situations and levels. Whereas behavioral

complexity was associated with turnover intentions in a call center, it did not predict employee absenteeism; since the former is a mere abstract attitude whereas absenteeism is a concrete behavior with very important performance consequences for organizations, this should be regarded as an important limitation of the leader's behavioral complexity concept. Future research should determine whether behavioral complexity is not effective at lower managerial positions in settings other than the call center service platform, and/or whether specific organizational conditions, such as intense job stress, limit its effectiveness. The research showed that, at call centers, a specific supervision style, people-oriented leadership, ameliorates subordinate turnover intentions and absenteeism. Future research which incorporates measurement of individual differences in job stress and is replicated in other organizational settings, such as the garment industry, is needed to determine whether job stress in fact moderates the relationship between person-oriented leadership and absenteeism and the targeted set of relationships transcends the specificity of the call center setting.

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