

Engaging Leadership and Work Engagement among Knowledge Workers: A Narrative Review of Theoretical Mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge workers have become central to contemporary organisations, particularly in settings where value creation depends less on routine execution than on expertise, judgement, problem-solving and continuous adaptation. Their work is often cognitively demanding and marked by ambiguity, which makes the question of work engagement especially important. This conceptual review examines how engaging leadership may help sustain work engagement among knowledge workers.

Building mainly on the Job Demands–Resources model and basic psychological needs theory, the article presents engaging leadership as a leadership style that generates resources rather than merely supervises performance. Through strengthening, connecting, empowering and inspiring behaviours, engaging leaders may support several mechanisms that are particularly relevant to knowledge-intensive work: autonomy support, competence development, relatedness and belonging, meaningful work, and personal resources. These mechanisms are discussed in relation to the three dimensions of work engagement: vigour, dedication and absorption.

The article contributes to the leadership and engagement literature by clarifying why engaging leadership is particularly relevant in knowledge-intensive work contexts and by proposing a mechanism-based conceptual framework. It also highlights the need for further empirical research, especially in underrepresented cultural, organisational and non-Western contexts. The review offers practical implications for managers seeking to sustain engagement among knowledge workers by moving beyond supervision and control toward leadership practices that develop people, connect them to others, grant meaningful autonomy and reinforce the purpose of work.

Keywords: engaging leadership; work engagement; knowledge workers; Job Demands–Resources model; leadership; motivation; narrative review.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge workers now sit at the heart of how organisations create value, adapt and innovate. The term usually refers to roles where the core contribution comes from specialised knowledge, analysis, problem-solving and judgement rather than from following set procedures (Drucker, 1999; Pyöriä, 2005). This does not mean that knowledge workers are free from constraints. On the contrary, their work is often demanding because it requires both autonomy and accountability.

This paper adopts a narrative review combined with conceptual synthesis. Its purpose is not to deliver an exhaustive or statistically aggregated account of every empirical study linking engaging leadership to work engagement, but rather to clarify the theoretical mechanisms through which engaging leadership may support work engagement specifically among knowledge workers. Narrative reviews lend themselves to this kind of contribution because they allow concepts to be organised, theoretical perspectives to be compared and an

integrative framework to be constructed, without the requirement to pool effect sizes or adhere to a fully replicable systematic protocol (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006).

The choice fits the nature of the topic. Engaging leadership, work engagement and knowledge work sit at the intersection of several research streams—leadership studies, motivational theory, the Job Demands–Resources model and the wider engagement literature—without being fully contained within any single one. An integrative approach therefore makes sense: it draws together foundational theoretical contributions and selected empirical studies that illuminate why engaging leadership may prove especially relevant in knowledge-intensive settings. The aim is not to assert comprehensiveness, but to use the literature to build a theoretically grounded argument about the relationship in question.

Literature was selected purposively from organisational psychology, human resource management, leadership studies and work engagement research. Searches centred on combinations of terms including “engaging leadership”, “work engagement”, “knowledge workers”, “knowledge work”, “Job Demands–Resources model”, “self-determination theory”, “basic psychological needs”, “leadership and engagement” and “personal resources”. Priority was given to peer-reviewed articles and major theoretical works that spoke directly to four areas: the conceptualisation of engaging leadership, the definition and measurement of work engagement, the distinctive features of knowledge work, and the resource-based processes connecting leadership to employee motivation.

Three questions guided the analysis. What distinguishes knowledge workers as a group when it comes to motivation and engagement? In what ways does engaging leadership differ from broader positive leadership approaches? And through which theoretical pathways might engaging leadership shape the three dimensions of work engagement—vigour, dedication and absorption? These questions provided structure without imposing a rigid template on the material.

The analysis draws principally on the Job Demands–Resources model, basic psychological needs theory and the work engagement literature. The Job Demands–Resources model supplies the central explanatory lens because it frames work engagement as a motivational outcome that emerges from the interplay between job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Basic psychological needs theory complements this view by clarifying why autonomy, competence and relatedness matter for intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Kahn’s (1990) work on personal engagement further informs the discussion, particularly his emphasis on the conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability that enable people to invest themselves more fully in their roles.

Engaging leadership serves as the focal leadership construct precisely because it was developed to explain how leaders can foster work engagement. Schaufeli’s (2015, 2021) model identifies four dimensions—strengthening, connecting, empowering and inspiring—that function here as an organising framework for examining how leaders may generate developmental, social, autonomy-related and meaning-related resources for employees.

The paper is organised as follows. It first describes the review approach. It then looks at what makes knowledge workers distinctive and why sustaining their engagement is challenging. Next comes a discussion of engaging leadership and its four dimensions. After that, the concept of work engagement and its three components is presented. The Job Demands–Resources model is then used as the main explanatory lens. Finally, the review proposes a conceptual framework and discusses contributions, implications, limitations and directions for future research.

Review Approach

This paper adopts a narrative review combined with conceptual synthesis. The objective is not to provide an exhaustive or statistically integrated account of all empirical studies on engaging leadership and work engagement, but to clarify the theoretical mechanisms through which engaging leadership may foster work engagement among knowledge workers. Narrative reviews are particularly appropriate when the aim is to organise concepts, compare theoretical perspectives and build an integrative framework, rather than to aggregate

effect sizes or follow a fully replicable systematic-review protocol (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006).

A narrative review is appropriate for this type of contribution when the objective is to organise concepts, compare theoretical perspectives and build an interpretive framework rather than to aggregate effect sizes or follow a fully standardised review protocol (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006). This choice is also consistent with the nature of the topic. Engaging leadership, work engagement and knowledge work are linked, but they are not always discussed within the same research stream. They appear across leadership studies, motivational theory, the Job Demands–Resources model and the broader literature on employee engagement.

An integrative approach therefore makes sense: it draws together foundational theoretical contributions and selected empirical studies that illuminate why engaging leadership may prove especially relevant in knowledge-intensive settings. The aim is not to assert comprehensiveness, but to use the literature to build a theoretically grounded argument about the relationship in question.

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Engaging leadership is used as the focal leadership construct because it was specifically developed to explain how leaders may foster work engagement. Schaufeli’s (2015, 2021) model identifies four dimensions of engaging leadership: strengthening, connecting, empowering and inspiring. These dimensions are used in this article as an organising framework for examining how leaders may generate developmental, social, autonomy-related and meaning-related resources for employees.

Rather than testing hypotheses, the article develops a conceptual argument. It proposes that engaging leadership may foster work engagement among knowledge workers through five interconnected mechanisms: autonomy support, competence development, relatedness and belonging, meaningful work, and personal resources. These mechanisms are presented as theoretically plausible pathways that require further empirical examination, especially in knowledge-intensive work environments and in cultural or organisational contexts that remain less represented in the existing literature.

Knowledge Workers and the Challenge of Work Engagement

Knowledge workers hold a particular position in contemporary organisations. Their work is not defined mainly by repetitive execution, but by the use of knowledge, judgement and interpretation. They are expected to analyse information, make sense of complex situations, design solutions and coordinate with different stakeholders (Davenport, 2005; Drucker, 1999; Pyöriä, 2005). In practical terms, this includes many professional groups: employees in information technology, engineering, finance, auditing, human resources, training, communication, marketing, quality management, project management, strategy, data analysis or product development.

What these roles have in common is not simply a high level of qualification. It is the nature of the work itself. Knowledge work usually involves non-routine tasks, uncertainty and a strong cognitive component. In a knowledge-based economy, organisational performance depends less on the repetition of standard procedures and more on the capacity to solve problems, interpret information and generate new ideas (Drucker, 1999; Pyöriä, 2005). This makes knowledge workers valuable, but it also exposes them to a specific form of pressure. They are often expected to be autonomous, creative and responsive, while remaining aligned with organisational priorities.

For this group, engagement matters in a very concrete way. Their performance does not depend only on whether tasks are formally completed. It also depends on the extent to which they are willing to invest intellectual, emotional and social energy in their work. Kahn (1990) described personal engagement as the expression of the self in the work role, physically, cognitively and emotionally. This definition fits knowledge work particularly well. A knowledge worker may be present, qualified and technically competent, but still contribute less to innovation, learning or collective problem-solving if engagement is low.

The demands placed on knowledge workers are also changing. Many of them have to deal with information overload, time pressure, digital tools, unclear problems, continuous learning and collaboration across functions (Davenport, 2005; Pyöriä, 2005). These demands are not necessarily negative. Some may be stimulating. The difficulty is that they require enough resources to be experienced as challenges rather than as sources of exhaustion. Without such resources, the same work that should be intellectually engaging can become fragmented, stressful or meaningless.

This is why work engagement is a central issue in knowledge-intensive contexts. Engagement allows employees to maintain energy, dedication and concentration even when work is demanding (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Schaufeli et al., 2006). Still, engagement does not appear automatically because someone is highly educated or occupies a qualified position. Knowledge workers may disengage when they encounter excessive workload, insufficient recognition, restricted autonomy, ineffective leadership, limited opportunities for development or a diminishing sense of meaning in their tasks. This pattern aligns with the Job Demands–Resources model, which shows that inadequate resources tend to erode motivation and engagement, particularly when job demands are elevated (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017).

Leadership therefore occupies a central rather than peripheral place in this discussion. It can either strengthen or undermine the very conditions that allow knowledge workers to remain engaged. Leaders influence whether employees feel trusted to make decisions, whether they receive useful feedback, whether their expertise is recognised, and whether their work is connected to a broader purpose. They also shape the social climate in which knowledge is shared. In this sense, leadership affects several of the resources that knowledge workers need to stay engaged. These resources are close to the mechanisms through which engaging leadership is expected to operate: autonomy, competence, relatedness, meaning and personal resources (Schaufeli, 2015, 2021; Tummers & Bakker, 2021).

Engaging Leadership: Definition and Theoretical Specificity

Engaging leadership is generally presented as a positive leadership style, but its specificity lies in its explicit connection with work engagement. It does not only describe leaders who are supportive or inspirational in a

broad sense. More precisely, it refers to leader behaviours that create the conditions under which employees are more likely to feel energised, involved and psychologically connected to their work (Schaufeli, 2015, 2021).

This distinction is useful because engaging leadership is close to, but not identical with, other positive leadership approaches. Transformational leadership, for instance, gives strong attention to vision, inspiration and change. Servant leadership places the emphasis on serving followers and responding to their needs. Engaging leadership shares some of these concerns, yet it is more directly anchored in the question of employee engagement. Its central preoccupation is how leaders can help employees stay motivated and invested in their work, particularly when demands are high (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Schaufeli, 2015).

Schaufeli's model frames engaging leadership through four interrelated dimensions: strengthening, connecting, empowering and inspiring (Schaufeli, 2015, 2021). These dimensions do not function as separate techniques applied in a mechanical way. Rather, they represent complementary ways in which leaders can supply employees with resources that support motivation, development, belonging, autonomy and meaning.

Strengthening captures the leader's effort to encourage employees to develop their talents and draw on their strengths. For knowledge workers, whose contribution rests on expertise, continuous learning and the application of specialised skills in evolving situations, this dimension carries particular weight. A strengthening leader does not merely assign tasks. They help employees recognise what they do well, build confidence in their capabilities and expand their professional repertoire. In theoretical terms, strengthening connects directly to competence development, which self-determination theory identifies as one of the basic psychological needs that underpin motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Connecting refers to leader behaviours that foster collaboration, shared goals and a sense of team spirit. Although knowledge work often hinges on individual expertise, it seldom succeeds through isolated effort. Employees need to exchange information, coordinate decisions and develop trust with colleagues across boundaries. By supporting cooperation and a collective purpose, engaging leaders help employees experience their work as part of something larger than their individual tasks. This dimension speaks to the need for relatedness—the fundamental need to feel connected to others and included in a social group (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Empowering concerns the leader's capacity to grant employees autonomy, responsibility and voice. This dimension proves especially consequential in knowledge-intensive work, where employees routinely need latitude to exercise judgement and take initiative. Excessive control can stifle creativity and erode motivation, particularly when tasks require interpretation, problem-solving and adaptation. Empowerment, by contrast, signals trust. It creates space for employees to make decisions, express their perspectives and take ownership of their contributions. This aligns with self-determination theory, which treats autonomy as a core condition for intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Inspiring describes the leader's ability to communicate a meaningful vision and help employees grasp the value of their contribution. This does not involve abstract motivational language disconnected from daily realities. For knowledge workers, inspiration becomes effective when it links complex, often ambiguous tasks to a broader purpose. When employees understand why their work matters, effort can be experienced differently—not merely as a response to external pressure, but as a meaningful investment of energy. It is no longer only a response to pressure; it can become a meaningful investment of energy. The idea also fits Kahn's (1990) view that meaningfulness is one of the psychological conditions that support personal engagement at work.

Taken together, these four dimensions show that engaging leadership is not limited to interpersonal support or motivational speeches. It combines developmental, relational, autonomy-supportive and meaning-oriented behaviours. This combination makes the style particularly relevant for knowledge-intensive contexts, where engagement depends on both job resources and personal resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli, 2015).

Engaging leadership can therefore be understood as a resource-generating leadership style. It helps employees access the psychological, social and motivational conditions required for engagement. This orientation makes it

highly compatible with the Job Demands–Resources model, in which job resources play a central role in stimulating work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Work Engagement: Vigor, Dedication and Absorption

Work engagement is commonly defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterised by vigor, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Schaufeli et al., 2006). It reflects a deep and active form of motivation rather than simple job satisfaction or organisational commitment. Engaged employees are energised by their work, find it meaningful and can concentrate fully on what they are doing.

Vigor refers to high levels of energy, mental resilience and persistence at work (Schaufeli et al., 2002). For knowledge workers this dimension carries particular weight. Their tasks frequently demand sustained concentration, complex problem-solving and the capacity to continue despite uncertainty or ambiguity. When vigour is present, employees are more likely to stay active and persistent even when the work feels demanding or when solutions do not emerge immediately.

Dedication reflects a deeper involvement in work. It is associated with enthusiasm, pride, inspiration, a sense of significance and the feeling of being challenged (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Schaufeli et al., 2006). This dimension holds special relevance for knowledge workers because their engagement is often tied to professional identity. They do not simply execute tasks; they also need to experience their expertise as useful, recognised and connected to something worthwhile. When this sense of significance is absent, work can remain technically demanding yet emotionally flat.

Absorption refers to being fully concentrated and immersed in work, sometimes to the point that time seems to pass quickly (Schaufeli et al., 2002). In knowledge-intensive activities, absorption can enable deep analysis, creativity and complex problem-solving. It does not, however, emerge in a vacuum. Absorption becomes more attainable when employees have sufficient autonomy, clear priorities, adequate resources and fewer unnecessary interruptions. A fragmented environment can prevent even highly qualified employees from achieving genuine immersion in their work.

The three dimensions are distinct yet operate in concert. Vigour supplies the energy invested in work. Dedication reflects the emotional and motivational attachment to work. Absorption captures the cognitive immersion in the task itself (Schaufeli et al., 2006). This threefold structure proves especially useful for understanding knowledge work, because knowledge-intensive activities typically require all three elements simultaneously: energy to handle complexity, meaning to sustain effort over time, and concentration to produce high-quality outcomes.

Engaging leadership may influence each of these dimensions through different types of resources. Empowering behaviours can support vigour by granting employees greater room to act and take initiative. Inspiring behaviours can strengthen dedication by linking daily tasks to a broader purpose. Strengthening behaviours can facilitate absorption by helping employees apply and develop their skills on challenging work. Connecting behaviours can also contribute by fostering a social environment in which employees feel less isolated and more willing to invest effort.

The distinction between engagement, satisfaction and commitment remains important. A knowledge worker may be satisfied with working conditions or committed to the organisation while still displaying low engagement in daily work. Conversely, engagement implies a more active relationship with the work itself—one that involves effort, involvement and sustained attention. This is why work engagement has been treated as a central motivational construct in organisational research (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007).

The literature generally associates work engagement with positive outcomes such as persistence, initiative, performance and organisational contribution (Bakker & Leiter, 2010; Macey & Schneider, 2008). For knowledge workers these outcomes are especially consequential, because their added value often hinges on discretionary effort, creativity and sustained cognitive involvement (Davenport, 2005; Pyöriä, 2005). In this sense,

engagement is not merely a desirable psychological state. It also constitutes a condition that enables knowledge-intensive work to realise its full value.

The Job Demands–Resources Model as an Explanatory Framework

The Job Demands–Resources model provides a useful lens for understanding why engaging leadership may matter for work engagement. At its core, the model rests on a straightforward proposition: every job contains both demands and resources. Job demands refer to aspects of work that require sustained effort and can become costly when they are too intense or poorly managed. Job resources, by contrast, help employees achieve their work goals, reduce the strain created by demands, and support learning, motivation and development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

This distinction holds particular relevance for knowledge work. Knowledge workers frequently operate under conditions marked by cognitive load, uncertainty, responsibility, time pressure, digital complexity, continuous adaptation and the need to coordinate across boundaries (Davenport, 2005; Pyöriä, 2005). These demands are not inherently damaging. In many cases they form part of what makes knowledge work intellectually stimulating. Difficulties arise when demands remain high while the resources required to meet them are weak or inconsistent.

From this perspective, engagement depends in part on the balance between what the job requires and what the work environment supplies. When employees have sufficient resources, demanding work can be experienced as a challenge that stimulates effort, learning and involvement. When resources fall short, however, the same work can turn exhausting, fragmented or demotivating. This remains one of the central insights of the Job Demands–Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017).

Leadership enters the picture because leaders shape many of the resources employees encounter in their daily work. They can clarify priorities, offer useful feedback, encourage autonomy, recognise effort, support collaboration and help attach meaning to difficult tasks. They can equally do the opposite. A leader may heighten ambiguity, limit autonomy, overlook contributions or leave employees feeling that their work has little value. In this respect, leadership is not merely a background condition; it constitutes one of the principal channels through which resources are made available—or withheld.

Tummers and Bakker (2021) demonstrate that leadership occupies a significant position within Job Demands–Resources theory because leaders can influence both demands and resources. They may assist employees in reinterpreting demands as manageable challenges, and they may also reduce unnecessary obstacles through improved communication, coordination and support. This capacity is especially consequential in knowledge-intensive environments, where demands cannot always be eliminated. Complex work will remain complex. What can change is the way employees are supported while dealing with it.

Engaging leadership fits particularly well with this resource-based logic. Its four dimensions correspond to different categories of resources. Strengthening provides developmental resources by helping employees build competence and use their strengths. Connecting provides social resources by encouraging cooperation, shared goals and a sense of belonging. Empowering provides autonomy-related resources by giving employees responsibility and room to make decisions. Inspiring provides meaning-related resources by linking daily work to a broader purpose (Schaufeli, 2015, 2021).

These resources may activate the motivational process described by the Job Demands–Resources model. Employees who feel competent, supported, trusted and connected to a meaningful purpose are more likely to invest energy in their work. They are also more likely to persist when demands are high. In this sense, engaging leadership can be seen as a mechanism that transforms leadership behaviour into motivational resources, which may then support vigour, dedication and absorption.

The model also helps explain why engaging leadership may prove especially relevant for knowledge workers. Many already possess advanced skills and formal expertise. Yet expertise alone rarely suffices to sustain engagement over time. Employees also require the right conditions to mobilise what they know. They need

autonomy to exercise judgement, opportunities to develop their capabilities, social support to collaborate effectively, and a sense that their contribution matters. Engaging leadership can therefore function as a bridge between individual competence and sustained engagement in actual work.

Treating the Job Demands–Resources model as an explanatory framework allows the relationship between engaging leadership and work engagement to be examined in a structured manner. Engaging leadership is not approached here as a diffuse positive attitude on the part of the leader. It is considered as a set of behaviours that generate specific resources. These resources become particularly valuable when employees confront demanding, complex and knowledge-intensive work.

Theoretical Mechanisms Linking Engaging Leadership to Work Engagement

The relationship between engaging leadership and work engagement becomes clearer when we examine the mechanisms that connect them. Engaging leadership does not shape engagement through a single or automatic pathway. Its effects are more likely to operate through several motivational, social and psychological processes. This holds especially true for knowledge workers, whose engagement depends heavily on the quality of the resources available to them in demanding and often ambiguous work situations.

Five mechanisms appear especially relevant: autonomy support, competence development, relatedness and belonging, meaningful work, and personal resources. These mechanisms rarely operate in isolation. In practice they tend to reinforce one another. A leader who grants autonomy may simultaneously build confidence. A leader who connects employees around a shared goal may also heighten the meaning employees attach to their work. Separating the mechanisms analytically nevertheless helps clarify how engaging leadership can support the three dimensions of engagement—vigour, dedication and absorption.

Autonomy Support

Autonomy constitutes a central condition of knowledge work. Employees who handle complex, non-routine tasks require sufficient freedom to organise their work, select appropriate methods and exercise professional judgement (Davenport, 2005; Pyöriä, 2005). Without this room for discretion, knowledge work can quickly become constrained. Employees may continue to execute tasks, yet they are less likely to mobilise the full range of their expertise.

Engaging leadership supports autonomy principally through empowering behaviours. When leaders delegate responsibility, invite employees to express their views and enable them to participate in decisions that affect their work, they convey a clear signal of trust (Schaufeli, 2015, 2021). This does not imply that employees are left without direction. It means that the leader establishes a meaningful overall direction while leaving employees enough latitude to act intelligently within it.

Autonomy may support work engagement in several interrelated ways. It increases ownership: employees who feel they have influence over how their work is carried out are more inclined to invest energy and initiative. It also strengthens intrinsic motivation, because employees experience their actions as self-endorsed rather than externally imposed (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Furthermore, autonomy enables knowledge workers to adapt their methods to the specific complexity of the task, rather than applying rigid procedures that may not fit the situation at hand.

Through these processes, empowerment may contribute especially to vigour and absorption. Employees who feel trusted tend to display greater energy because their work is no longer experienced merely as compliance with instructions. They may also become more absorbed, since autonomy allows them to focus on complex tasks in a manner that aligns with their professional judgement. For knowledge workers this point carries particular weight: engagement often develops when responsibility is accompanied by genuine room to think and act. For knowledge workers, this point is important: engagement often grows when responsibility is accompanied by genuine room to think and act.

Competence Development

Knowledge workers are also strongly concerned with competence. Their professional value depends on what they know, how they use that knowledge and how they continue to develop it. In fast-changing environments, competence cannot be treated as something acquired once and for all. It needs to be maintained, renewed and recognised.

Engaging leadership supports competence mainly through strengthening behaviours. A strengthening leader encourages employees to identify their talents, use their strengths and develop their skills (Schaufeli, 2015). This is not a minor issue for knowledge workers. Their engagement may decline when they feel that their expertise is underused, ignored or no longer developing. Conversely, when employees feel that their abilities are recognised and stretched in meaningful ways, work may become more stimulating.

The link between competence and engagement is also supported by self-determination theory. Competence is one of the basic psychological needs that sustain intrinsic motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Employees are more likely to invest themselves in their work when they feel capable, useful and able to grow. Competence development may therefore strengthen self-efficacy, confidence and professional pride, all of which can feed into vigour and dedication.

This mechanism may also support absorption. When employees use their strongest skills in challenging tasks, they are more likely to become deeply involved in what they are doing. The task is neither too easy nor completely out of reach. It requires attention, but it also gives the employee a sense of mastery. Strengthening leadership therefore contributes not only to performance but also to the subjective experience of engagement.

Relatedness and Belonging

Although knowledge work is often associated with individual expertise, it is rarely performed in isolation. Knowledge workers need to collaborate, share information, coordinate decisions and participate in collective problem-solving (Davenport, 2005; Pyöriä, 2005). Engaging leadership supports relatedness through connecting behaviours. By promoting collaboration, common goals and team spirit, leaders create a social environment in which employees feel included and supported (Schaufeli, 2015).

Relatedness and belonging may foster engagement by increasing employees' emotional attachment to their work group and organisation. Relatedness is one of the basic psychological needs identified by self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Employees who feel connected to others are more likely to experience work as socially meaningful. They may also be more willing to invest discretionary effort when they perceive that their work contributes to a collective objective.

Connecting behaviours may be particularly relevant for dedication. Dedication involves enthusiasm, pride and a sense of significance (Schaufeli et al., 2002). These feelings become easier to sustain when employees identify with a team or a shared purpose. Social resources can also support vigour by lowering the psychological cost of demanding work. When employees feel supported rather than isolated, difficult tasks often become more manageable. This view aligns with the Job Demands–Resources model, which assigns an important role to social resources in sustaining motivation under high demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Meaningful work constitutes another central pathway between engaging leadership and work engagement. Knowledge workers frequently want to understand the value of what they do. Their motivation can weaken when work becomes fragmented, purely procedural or disconnected from a broader purpose. Even highly skilled employees may disengage when they no longer see why their contribution matters.

Engaging leadership supports meaningful work principally through inspiring behaviours. Inspiring leaders communicate a vision, express enthusiasm and help employees link their daily tasks to a larger objective (Schaufeli, 2015, 2021). This does not require grand speeches. In many cases meaning emerges through simple but consistent acts of interpretation: explaining why a project matters, how a task contributes to users or stakeholders, and why employees' expertise is needed.

Kahn (1990) identified psychological meaningfulness as one of the conditions that enable people to engage more fully in their work roles. The idea remains particularly relevant here. When employees perceive their work as meaningful, they become more willing to invest effort, attention and emotion. Meaning gives direction to energy. It can also render demanding work more acceptable, because the effort is attached to something employees consider worthwhile.

For knowledge workers, meaningful work may contribute especially to dedication. It strengthens the sense of significance, pride and involvement associated with engagement. It may also support vigour, because employees are more likely to persist when they understand the purpose of their effort. A demanding task is not necessarily discouraging when it is perceived as useful. Without meaning, however, even important work may feel like pressure without direction.

Personal Resources

The final mechanism concerns personal resources. Within the Job Demands–Resources model, personal resources refer to positive self-evaluations and psychological capacities that help individuals deal with their work environment. They include, for example, self-efficacy, optimism, resilience and flexibility (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). These resources are highly relevant for knowledge workers, who often face uncertainty, complexity and changing expectations.

Engaging leadership may contribute to personal resources through all four of its dimensions. Strengthening can increase self-efficacy by helping employees recognise and develop their abilities. Empowering can increase confidence and ownership. Connecting can provide social support and reduce isolation. Inspiring can increase optimism and purpose. Empirical studies on engaging leadership suggest that it may influence engagement through personal and team resources (Mazzetti & Schaufeli, 2022; Rahmadani et al., 2020).

This mechanism is important because engagement is not only a response to external job resources. It is also shaped by how employees perceive their capacity to act, cope and contribute. Engaging leadership may therefore influence work engagement both directly, by improving the work environment, and indirectly, by strengthening personal resources.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

Based on the previous discussion, this review proposes a conceptual framework in which engaging leadership fosters work engagement among knowledge workers through five main mechanisms: autonomy support, competence development, relatedness and belonging, meaningful work and personal resources.

The four dimensions of engaging leadership contribute to these mechanisms in complementary ways. Strengthening mainly supports competence development and personal resources. Connecting mainly supports relatedness and belonging. Empowering mainly supports autonomy and ownership. Inspiring mainly supports meaningful work and dedication (Schaufeli, 2015, 2021). These mechanisms then contribute to the three dimensions of work engagement: vigor, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Schaufeli et al., 2006).

The framework suggests that engaging leadership is especially relevant for knowledge workers because it provides resources that match the specific requirements of knowledge-intensive work. Knowledge workers need autonomy to make decisions, competence to deal with complexity, relatedness to collaborate, meaning to sustain dedication and personal resources to cope with uncertainty (Davenport, 2005; Pyöriä, 2005). Engaging leadership addresses these needs in an integrated way.

This framework does not imply that engaging leadership is the only antecedent of work engagement. Other factors, such as job design, organisational culture, psychological safety, workload, reward systems and career opportunities, may also play important roles. However, engaging leadership provides a useful integrative lens because it captures leader behaviours that directly influence several categories of resources (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Tummers & Bakker, 2021).

Table 1. Conceptual mechanisms linking engaging leadership to work engagement among knowledge workers

Engaging leadership dimension	Main leader behaviours	Main theoretical mechanism	Expected contribution to work engagement
Strengthening	Encouraging employees to develop their talents; helping them use their strengths; supporting learning and development	Competence development and self-efficacy	Increases vigor by strengthening confidence and resilience; increases dedication by reinforcing professional pride; supports absorption when employees use their strongest skills
Connecting	Encouraging collaboration; promoting shared goals; building team spirit	Relatedness, belonging and social support	Increases dedication by creating a sense of collective purpose; supports vigor by reducing isolation and increasing social resources
Empowering	Delegating responsibility; granting autonomy; encouraging voice and ownership	Autonomy support and perceived control	Increases vigor by stimulating initiative and energy; supports absorption by allowing employees to organise their work around complex tasks
Inspiring	Communicating enthusiasm; linking work to a meaningful vision; helping employees feel that they contribute to something important	Meaningful work and purpose	Increases dedication by strengthening meaning, pride and enthusiasm; supports vigor and persistence in demanding situations
Overall engaging leadership	Combining development, collaboration, autonomy and meaning	Resource generation and personal resources	Supports the three dimensions of work engagement: vigor, dedication and absorption

Based on the preceding discussion, Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework in which engaging leadership supports work engagement among knowledge workers through a set of interrelated mechanisms. The framework does not represent an empirically tested model in the present article. Rather, it synthesises theoretically plausible pathways derived from the Job Demands–Resources model, basic psychological needs theory and the work engagement literature.

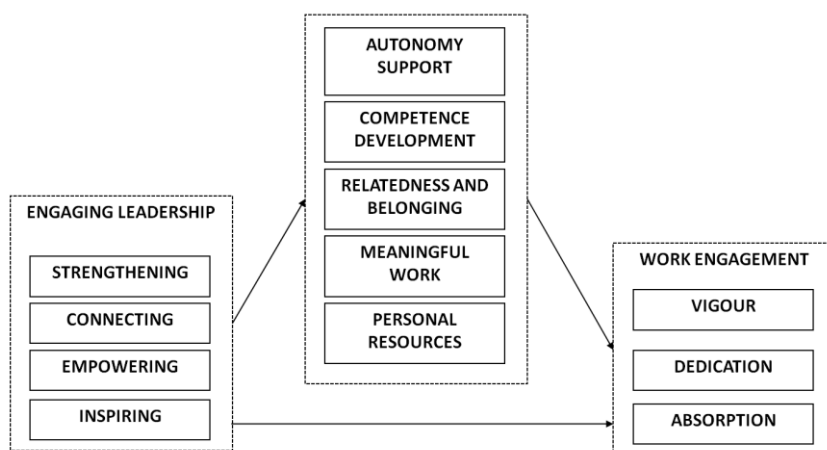


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework linking engaging leadership to work engagement among knowledge workers.

The framework suggests that engaging leadership may foster work engagement both directly and indirectly by generating key motivational, social and psychological resources. Strengthening, connecting, empowering and inspiring behaviours are expected to support competence development, relatedness and belonging, autonomy support, meaningful work and personal resources, which in turn contribute to vigour, dedication and absorption.

Theoretical Contribution

This review contributes to the literature in three main ways. It clarifies the relevance of engaging leadership for knowledge-intensive work. Although leadership has often been studied as a general antecedent of employee engagement, knowledge workers represent a specific population whose engagement depends strongly on autonomy, learning, meaning and cognitive involvement (Davenport, 2005; Pyöriä, 2005). For this reason, their engagement cannot be understood only through formal job characteristics or general attitudes toward the organisation. It also depends on whether the work environment allows them to think, decide, collaborate and keep developing. By focusing on this population, the review shows why engaging leadership may be especially relevant for contemporary organisations.

The article also strengthens the connection between engaging leadership and the Job Demands–Resources model. Engaging leadership is often presented as a positive leadership style, but the JD-R model helps explain how it may actually work. The four dimensions of engaging leadership can be interpreted as different forms of resources. Strengthening provides developmental resources. Connecting provides social resources. Empowering provides autonomy-related resources. Inspiring provides meaning-related resources (Schaufeli, 2015, 2021). This reading gives the construct a clearer theoretical position: engaging leadership is not simply a set of desirable behaviours, but a way of generating resources that may activate the motivational process leading to work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Finally, the review proposes a mechanism-based framework rather than a simple direct association between leadership and engagement. In much of the applied discussion, leadership is treated as something that “increases engagement” without specifying the intermediate processes involved. This article argues that the relationship is better understood through five pathways: autonomy support, competence development, relatedness and belonging, meaningful work, and personal resources. These mechanisms make the argument more precise. They also offer a clearer basis for future empirical studies, since each mechanism can be operationalised, tested and compared across contexts.

The proposed framework also helps position engaging leadership in relation to other positive leadership approaches. It does not deny the value of transformational, servant or authentic leadership. Rather, it suggests that engaging leadership has a specific contribution because it is directly organised around the resources that support work engagement. This is theoretically useful in a field where leadership constructs can sometimes overlap. By linking each dimension of engaging leadership to a specific category of resources and to the dimensions of work engagement, the review gives the construct a more focused explanatory role.

Finally, this article points to the importance of studying engaging leadership in underrepresented cultural and organisational contexts. Much of the literature on leadership and engagement has been developed in Western settings. Yet knowledge work is expanding across different regions, sectors and institutional environments. The way employees experience autonomy, authority, collaboration and meaning may vary across contexts. For this reason, further research is needed to examine whether the mechanisms discussed in this review operate in the same way across cultures and organisational forms, or whether they require contextual adaptation.

Managerial Implications

The arguments developed in this review have several implications for managers and organisations that rely on knowledge workers. A first implication is that engagement should not be treated as a purely individual matter. When employees appear less involved, less energetic or less willing to contribute beyond minimum expectations, the explanation is not always a lack of personal motivation. It may also reflect a work environment that does not provide enough resources for engagement to emerge and be sustained.

For knowledge workers, this point is particularly important. Their contribution depends heavily on judgement, initiative, learning and collaboration. These cannot be obtained only through formal supervision or performance monitoring. Managers therefore need to move beyond a control-oriented view of leadership. Their role is also to create conditions in which employees can use their expertise, make decisions, learn from their work and connect their contribution to a broader purpose.

Engaging leadership offers a practical vocabulary for this shift. Strengthening implies that managers pay attention to employees' talents and development needs rather than focusing solely on immediate task delivery. Connecting means that leaders actively support cooperation, shared goals and the circulation of knowledge across individuals or teams. Empowering requires managers to give employees real room to act, not merely formal responsibility without decision-making space. Inspiring means helping employees understand why their work matters and how it contributes to organisational or collective objectives.

These implications are especially relevant in knowledge-intensive settings, where excessive control may have unintended effects. Highly qualified employees may interpret close supervision as a lack of trust. They may also disengage when their expertise is underused, when their work is fragmented, or when they cannot see the meaning of what they are asked to do. Engaging leadership can reduce this risk by combining autonomy, development, collaboration and purpose in daily managerial practice.

Leadership development programmes should therefore include the four dimensions of engaging leadership. Training managers to strengthen, connect, empower and inspire employees may help organisations translate the concept of engagement into observable behaviours. Such programmes should not remain abstract. They can include practical exercises on giving developmental feedback, delegating responsibility, facilitating team cooperation, recognising expertise and explaining the meaning of strategic or operational priorities.

Another implication concerns organisational transformation. Digitalisation, restructuring, new technologies and increasing performance pressure often raise the demands placed on knowledge workers. These demands cannot always be removed. In many cases, they are part of the work itself. What managers can do, however, is ensure that employees are not left to face these demands without sufficient resources. Engaging leadership may help employees interpret demanding situations as manageable and meaningful rather than merely exhausting.

Finally, organisations should be cautious not to reduce engaging leadership to individual managerial goodwill. Leaders themselves need organisational support, room for action and coherent HR practices. It is difficult for managers to empower employees if decision-making is highly centralised, or to inspire them if organisational priorities are unclear. For engaging leadership to become effective, it should be supported by broader practices related to communication, career development, recognition, workload management and participation in decision-making.

Limitations and Future Research

Like any conceptual review, this article has limitations. It does not present a systematic review of all empirical studies on engaging leadership, work engagement or knowledge workers. The objective was different: to build a theoretically grounded synthesis around the mechanisms that may connect engaging leadership to work engagement in knowledge-intensive settings. The proposed framework should therefore be read as an integrative argument rather than as an exhaustive map of the literature.

A second limitation concerns the nature of the evidence discussed. The article draws on established theories and selected empirical studies, but it does not test the proposed relationships directly. The five mechanisms identified — autonomy support, competence development, relatedness and belonging, meaningful work, and personal resources — remain theoretically plausible pathways. They now require examination through empirical research. Longitudinal studies would be particularly useful, since engagement and leadership are dynamic processes that may evolve over time. Multi-source designs could also reduce the risk of relying solely on employees' self-reported perceptions.

The literature on engaging leadership is still relatively recent compared with other positive leadership approaches such as transformational, servant or authentic leadership. This creates both a limitation and an opportunity. On the one hand, the empirical base remains narrower. On the other hand, engaging leadership offers a more focused way of studying leadership behaviours that are explicitly connected to work engagement (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020, 2021; Schaufeli, 2015, 2021). Future research should therefore examine whether engaging leadership explains work engagement beyond related leadership constructs.

Another important direction concerns context. Much of the existing literature on leadership and engagement has been developed in Western organisational settings. Yet the meaning of autonomy, collaboration, authority and inspiration may vary across cultures and institutional environments. This matters for knowledge workers, whose work is increasingly present in emerging, African, Arab and Francophone contexts as well. Future studies should therefore examine whether the mechanisms proposed in this article operate similarly across different cultural and organisational settings, or whether they require contextual adaptation.

Future research could also investigate the conditions under which engaging leadership becomes more or less effective. For example, engaging leadership may have stronger effects when employees already have a minimum level of job autonomy, psychological safety or organisational support. Conversely, its effects may be weakened in highly bureaucratic, unstable or resource-constrained environments. In such contexts, leaders may want to empower or inspire employees, but lack the organisational room to do so.

Finally, further studies should examine the possible tensions of engaging leadership. Encouraging autonomy, development and involvement is generally positive, but it may also create expectations of constant availability, self-management or emotional investment. For knowledge workers this point deserves particular attention. Engagement should not become a disguised form of overwork. Future research would benefit from examining not only how engaging leadership increases work engagement, but also how it can support sustainable engagement over time.

CONCLUSION

This article examined how engaging leadership may contribute to work engagement among knowledge workers. Drawing on the Job Demands–Resources model and basic psychological needs theory. It argued that engaging leadership can be understood as a resource-generating leadership style. Through strengthening, connecting, empowering and inspiring behaviours, leaders may provide employees with resources that are especially valuable in knowledge-intensive work: autonomy, competence development, relatedness, meaningful work and personal resources.

The discussion also showed why this relationship deserves particular attention in the case of knowledge workers. Their work is often complex, non-routine and cognitively demanding. It requires expertise, but also discretion, concentration, collaboration and a sense of purpose. In such conditions, engagement cannot be sustained only through formal supervision or individual motivation. It depends on whether the work environment gives employees enough resources to remain energetic, dedicated and absorbed in what they do.

Engaging leadership offers a useful way to understand this process. Strengthening helps employees develop and use their abilities. Connecting places individual expertise within a collective effort. Empowering gives employees room to act and make judgements. Inspiring links daily work to a broader meaning. Together, these behaviours may support the motivational conditions that allow knowledge workers to invest themselves more fully in their work.

The article therefore contributes to the literature by proposing a mechanism-based framework rather than treating the relationship between leadership and engagement as a simple direct link. The five mechanisms identified in this review — autonomy support, competence development, relatedness and belonging, meaningful work, and personal resources — offer a basis for future empirical research. They also provide a practical language for managers and organisations seeking to support sustainable engagement in knowledge-intensive contexts.

Further research is still needed to test these mechanisms, especially through longitudinal and multi-source designs. More attention should also be given to non-Western, African, Arab and Francophone organisational settings, where the meanings of autonomy, authority, collaboration and inspiration may differ. For practitioners, the central message is that engaging knowledge workers requires more than assigning tasks or monitoring performance. It requires leadership practices that help people grow, connect with others, act with meaningful autonomy and understand the value of their contribution.

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