

Relationship between Leadership Readiness and Conflict Management Styles from the Followers' Perspective

Inês Silva, Catarina Morais, A. Rui Gomes

¹ Adaptation, Performance, and Human Development Research Group. School of Psychology. University of Minho. Braga, Portugal. ORCID: 0009-0000-7303-0532; ² Research Centre for Human Development, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Portuguese Catholic University. Porto, Portugal. ORCID: 0000-0002-9881-3514; ³ Psychology Research Centre. School of Psychology. University of Minho. Braga, Portugal. Contact author: rgomes@psi.uminho.pt. ORCID: 0000-0002-6390-9866.

Abstract: Leaders have a critical role in promoting working conditions that actively consider the health and wellbeing of employees. Therefore, studying the impacts leadership produce at work is key. This study analyzes the relationship between leadership and conflict management styles, specifically examining how followers' perception of managers' leadership readiness relates to their perception of managers' conflict management styles. The study included 185 participants (67.6% men; 28.1% women), all employees of a metalworking company, with ages between 19 and 67 years old ($M = 38.14$; $SD = 10.94$). It was evaluated leadership (cycles, styles, and antecedent factors) and conflict management styles. The results showed that: (a) followers perceived that managers should turn clearer their leadership philosophy, practice, and criteria; and (b) positive perceptions of managers' leadership were associated with higher levels of transformational conflict management style and lower levels of hesitant and competitive conflict management styles. Overall, this study indicates that there is a gap between followers' and managers' perceptions of leadership and that a more positive evaluation of leadership readiness relates to more positive management styles by the leaders.

Keywords: Leadership; Readiness; Conflict Management; Leadership Styles; Leadership Behaviors, Contextual leadership.

Relação entre Prontidão para Liderança e Gestão de Conflitos na Perspetiva dos Trabalhadores

Resumo: É fundamental estudar os impactos da liderança no trabalho, devido à necessidade de promover condições de trabalho que considerem ativamente a saúde e o bem-estar dos colaboradores. Neste sentido, este estudo analisa a relação entre os estilos de liderança e a gestão de conflitos, nomeadamente, a forma como a perceção dos trabalhadores sobre a prontidão das respetivas chefias para a liderança se relaciona com a perceção dos trabalhadores sobre os estilos de gestão de conflitos assumidos pelas chefias. O estudo incluiu 185 participantes (67.6% homens; 28.1% mulheres), todos funcionários de uma empresa metalúrgica, com idades compreendidas entre os 19 e os 67 anos ($M = 38.14$; $DP = 10.94$). Foram avaliados os estilos de liderança (ciclos, estilos e fatores antecedentes) e de gestão de conflitos. Os resultados mostraram que: (a) os trabalhadores pensam que as chefias devem tornar mais clara a sua filosofia, prática e indicadores de liderança; e (b) as perceções positivas da liderança das chefias estavam associadas a níveis elevados de estilo de gestão de conflitos transformacional e a níveis mais baixos de estilos de gestão de conflitos hesitantes e competitivos. De um modo geral, este estudo indica que existe um fosso entre as perceções de liderança dos trabalhadores e das chefias, e que uma avaliação mais positiva da disposição para a liderança está relacionada com estilos de gestão mais positivos por parte das chefias.

Palavras-chave: Liderança, Prontidão; Gestão de Conflitos, Ciclos de Liderança, Perceção dos Trabalhadores.

1. Introduction

In a context that is constantly changing, competitive, and complex, leaders assume a crucial role in coordinating an organization's activities and providing direction. They are responsible for managing needs and demands, as well as balancing different expectations and attitudes by the employees, stimulating an environment that promotes teamwork, collaboration, and open communication. In this way, leaders must constantly adapt and expand their skills to ensure the success of the organization. In the organizational context, leaders and followers often differ in terms of values, beliefs, behaviors, preferences, and needs, yet they must cooperate and work together to achieve the organization's goals (García & Corbett, 2013). These differences can lead to conflict, a phenomenon that is part of organizational dynamics. Conflict in the workplace can go from small differences of opinion to big and significant arguments where the parties involved can omit relevant information, try to break each other's privacy and create feelings of the antagonism (Middents, 1990). It is interesting to note that according to the American historian Slater, leaders spend 20% of their working time managing and resolving conflicts (Yi, 2019). Thus, it may be important to analyze the potential relationships established between leadership and conflict management which is the main topic of this study. The need of studying the impacts produced by leadership at work is critical due to the need of promoting working conditions that actively consider the health and wellbeing of employees. This need is sustained by previous research showing that when employees have work conditions with negative leadership there is a tendency to emerge several organizational costs, as is the case of absenteeism, turnover, work errors, interpersonal conflicts, and even burnout, among other undesirable consequences (Bregenzer et al., 2019; Gurt et al., 2011; Jiménez et al., 2017). In turn, these negative effects can ultimately put at risk the survival and development of organizations (Pescud et al., 2015). But the inverse is also demonstrable, meaning that positive forms of leadership are associated with more positive work conditions for employees, by increasing their levels of job satisfaction, job engagement, affective commitment, and health (Gurt et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2022). The main goal of our study aligns with this framework by studying the relationship between leadership and conflict management perceived by employees of a metalworking company; specifically, it is analyzed the employees' perceptions of their managers leadership (as independent variables) and how conflicts are dealt by the managers according the employees' perspective (as dependent variable expressing their working conditions).

2. State of the Art

The need to develop healthy places to work has been gathering the interest of researchers and managers. In fact, employees in organizations that prioritize health and well-being tend to be more efficient, more satisfied with their jobs, less likely to leave, and more willing to take on additional roles (cf. Ford et al., 2011; Kramer & Son, 2016; Wright & Cropanzano, 2000). One major factor that contributes to these positive environments at work is leadership, existing even several models dedicated to the concept of "healthy leadership" referring to the leader attitudes (beliefs about the value given to health), values (how leaders prioritize the employee health), and/or behaviors (how leaders communicate the importance of exercise or recovery) (Rudolph et al., 2020). Assuming healthy leadership is even more important because there is evidence that job demands are increasing conducting to enhance the levels of stress at work (National Academy of Sciences, 1999). For example, Farias et al. (2023) in an integrative literature review about

the occupational health strategies related to the prevention and control of stress in the workplace found out that leadership and conflict management were two areas that can be related to the prevention of stress at work. In this way, there is an agreement that leadership can indeed impact the work conditions of followers, by producing impacts at both the individual level (e.g., health, well-being, job attitudes) and the organizational level (e.g., health management culture and practices) (Yao et al., 2021). Thus, the relationship between leaders and employees are very important because the support from the leader can indeed improve the way employees feel at work. The literature indicates that, in fact, there is a relationship between leadership styles and conflict management styles, being proposed that collaborative leadership is the most important style to manage conflict (Khan et al., 2015). Furthermore, Anastasiou (2020) reinforces this idea by stating that transformational leaders use collaboration to deal with conflict and that this is the best and most frequently used strategy. The research of Aravidou et al. (2025) showed that there is a relationship between collaborative and transformational leadership styles and compromising conflict management techniques. There are even some studies that studied the relationships between some less positive forms of leadership (as is the case of Laissez-Faire leadership), showing that some conditions may facilitate a problem-solving approach to manage conflicts (Elgoibar et al., 2024; Rahim, 2000; Yang, 2015).

Despite the interest in these findings, there is still a scarcity of knowledge about how leadership contributes to resolving conflicts between managers and followers. Specifically, our study contributes to the literature by using and analyzing data from the perception of followers and also by taking an integrative perspective of leadership related to the Leadership Efficacy Model (LEM, Gomes, 2020). The model states that leadership efficacy depends on the congruence between the conceptual cycle of leadership and the practical cycle of leadership and considers the moderating role of leadership styles and antecedent factors of leadership. The leadership efficacy model aims to explain the leader's efficacy through three central components: leadership cycles, leadership styles, and the antecedent factors of leadership. The first component is leadership cycles referring to the dynamics between what leaders think leadership is (conceptual cycle) and what leaders do when managing people (practical cycle). The interaction between both cycles increases the leadership efficacy by combining these behaviors with the needs of the followers. Leadership cycles include three elements: leadership philosophy (leader's values, beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, principles, and priorities about what being a leader is), leadership practice (assumed behaviors to fulfill the leadership philosophy), and leadership criteria (indicators used to evaluate the fulfilling of leadership philosophy and practice). In the LEM, it is proposed that the congruence between the conceptual and practical cycles increases leadership efficacy. The second component of the LEM is leadership styles referring to the behaviors assumed by leaders to implement the leadership cycles and thus achieve the intended goals. Leadership styles includes three elements: transformational leadership which refers to the leader's influence in follower's beliefs, values, and behavior to a level where they perform and sacrifice to the accepted positive vision, achieving outstanding results above those expected and includes five main behaviors (vision, inspiration, instruction, individualization, and support); transactional leadership which refers to the leader's influence based on an exchange between them and the followers, where the leader sets tasks and objectives to achieve, and the followers accept the leader's authority and expect material or psychological compensation for executing those tasks and includes two main behaviors (positive feedback and negative feedback); and

decision-making leadership which refers to the leader's influence based on how power is managed and decisions are assumed, including a more or less active behavior (centralized or decentralized), or a passive behavior (avoiding or delaying decision-making when problems arise) and includes two main behaviors (active management and passive management). In the LEM, it is proposed that if the congruence between the conceptual and practical cycles is achieved by using an optimal profile of leadership behaviors (i.e., higher use of transformational behaviors, higher use of positive feedback, and lower use of negative feedback from transactional leadership; and higher use of active management and lower use of passive management of decision-making leadership) then there is an increase in the leadership efficacy. The third component of the LEM is antecedent factors of leadership which include the personal and professional characteristics of the leader, the personal and professional characteristics of the followers, and also the characteristics of the context/situation where leadership occurs. In the LEM it is proposed that if the leader has an antecedent factor of leadership that facilitates the congruence between leadership cycles, then the efficacy of leadership increases. Figure 1 illustrates the LEM.

The current knowledge about the LEM derives mainly from sports contexts. In this context, Gomes et al. (2022) used the LEM to compare the perceptions of athletes and coaches on leadership cycles, and the moderator role of the optimal leadership profile and leadership favorability in this relationship. The authors found that a higher congruence of the leadership cycles is associated with athletes' higher perception of team performance and that a higher perception of leadership favorability is associated with higher perceptions of individual performance. In a study by Alves et al. (2021), focused on the relationship between the domains of leadership cycles and the verification of the main premise of the LEM, the authors found that a greater perception by the athletes of the congruence of the coaches' leadership cycles was associated with greater satisfaction with leadership and a greater perception of collective sporting performance by the athletes. In the organizational context, the same effects also occur. Morais et al. (2024) tested whether the congruence of leadership cycles positively predicted leadership efficacy through organizational commitment and job satisfaction and reached similar conclusions to those in the sports context, i.e. greater perceived congruence of leadership cycles was associated with greater organizational commitment from the employees and also greater satisfaction.

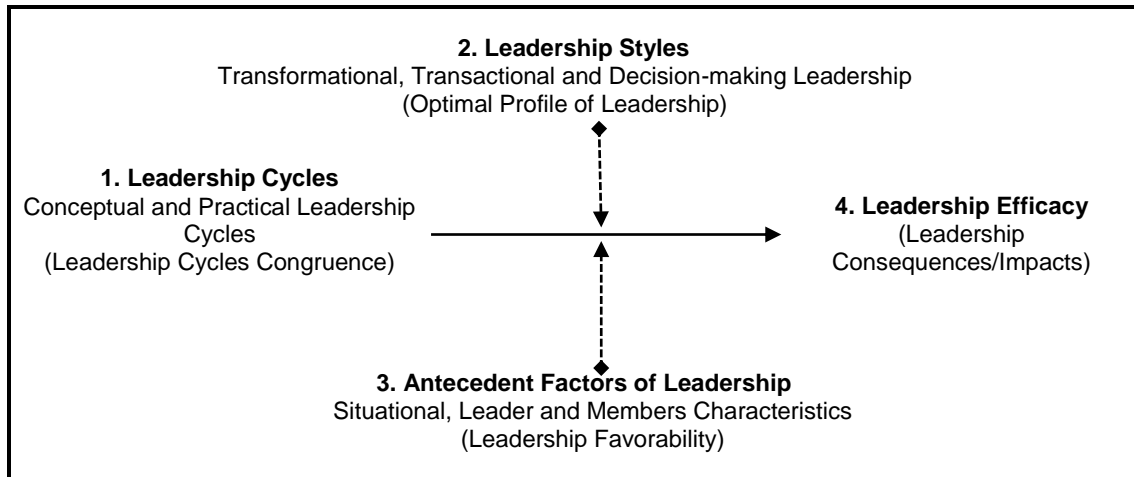
Despite the interest of these findings, there is no knowledge about the use of this model to study the relationship between leadership and conflict management styles. Our study adds to general current knowledge by using an integrative perspective of leadership that includes the three described factors (leadership cycles, leadership styles, and antecedent factors of leadership) to analyze the relationships with conflict management styles, taking into consideration the followers' perspective in an industrial-organizational context. Specifically, in our study we establish a single construct of leadership that integrates the three leadership factors of the LEM, named leadership readiness which can be defined as the mental representations of people about the leaders' abilities to use leadership skill; in our case, and following the background of the LEM, the leadership readiness relates to the leaders' abilities to set the relationship between the leadership cycles and how they use the leadership styles and consider the antecedent factors of leadership to achieve the congruence between leadership cycles. In this way, higher levels of readiness (i.e., positive perceptions of readiness) signify that leaders tend to establish linear relations between the conceptual and practical leadership cycles (by clarifying their philosophy, practice, and criteria) and then use the optimal profile of leadership behaviors

to implement the leadership cycles, by also considering the antecedent factors of leadership that can influence all the leadership process. In simple words, higher levels of leadership readiness mean that the leader is clear about the main aspects to be achieved, behaves in a way that facilitates the achievement of what is established, and considers internal and external factors that can facilitate or debilitate the intended goals. Lower levels of readiness (i.e., negative perceptions of readiness) signify that leaders do not establish linear relations between the conceptual and practical leadership cycles (by not clarifying their philosophy, practice, and criteria) and then use the suboptimal profile of leadership behaviors in the relationship with team members, and they tend to not consider the antecedent factors of leadership that can influence all the leadership process. In simple words, lower levels of leadership readiness mean that the leader is confusing about the main aspects to be achieved, do not behave in a way that facilitates the achievement of what is established, and do not take into consideration internal and external factors that can facilitate or debilitate the intended goals.

The evaluation of leadership readiness is typically done by the leader thinking on their own ability, but it can also be evaluated by considering the followers' perceptions by asking them to think about the readiness for leadership of their leaders (this last case was used in our study). Thus, our study adds to the literature by taking into account the leadership readiness concept which is much more than the concept of leadership styles mostly analyzed in current literature about the relationship between leadership and conflict management styles.

There is a great deal of research into leadership, resulting in a wide variety of definitions of the concept. In this study, leadership is assumed to be the process through which the leader influences the attitudes and behaviors of followers, motivating and encouraging them toward common goals. This definition was used by Anastasiou (2020) in a study on the influence of leadership and conflict management on job satisfaction and comes from the combination of the work of Evans (1998) and Northouse (2021).

Conflict, on the other hand, was conceptualized by Wall and Callister (1995) as the process in which one of the parties perceives that their interests are opposed or negatively affected by the other party or parties. In general, conflict management culminates in the combination of what the parties intend to do and what they do to resolve the conflict in the best way they understand (Van de Vliert, 1997). According to Gomes (2023), conflict management is defined by the communication strategies a person uses to deal with conflict and restore optimal functioning. According to Gomes (2023), these efforts to solve the conflicts can be categorized into five conflict management styles: (1) hesitant, in which one party avoids the conflict; (2) competitive, in which one party tries to impose its position on the other party; (3) benevolent, in which one party gives in for the sake of the other party's goals; (4) transactional, in which there is a compromise by all parties to achieve a minimally positive position for all involved; (5) transformational, in which there is a search for innovative and interesting solutions for all parties involved.

Figure 1 *Leadership Efficacy Model* (Gomes, 2020).

2. Method

2.1. Hypotheses of this Study

According to the relationship between leadership readiness and conflict management, and based on the Leadership Efficacy Model (Gomes, 2020), two hypotheses were formulated for this study:

H1 – Employees with higher perceptions about the leadership readiness of their managers (i.e., higher scores in measures of leadership) will have better evaluations about the conflict management styles used by their managers, compared to employees with lower positive perceptions of leadership readiness perceived by their managers. In other words, it is expected that employees with more positive perceptions of the leadership readiness of their managers will evaluate them as having a better ability to manage conflicts, compared to employees with less positive perceptions of the leadership readiness of their managers.

H2 – The perceptions assumed by the employees regarding the leadership readiness of their managers do not vary depending on the employees' personal and professional variables. In other words, it is expected that leadership readiness profiles will not vary depending on the personal and professional characteristics of employees.

2.2. Participants

The study included a convenience sample of 185 participants, all employees of a metalworking company in the refrigeration sector located in the north of Portugal.

2.3. Instruments

Demographic information

Sociodemographic Questionnaire: This questionnaire collected socio-demographic information, such as sex, age, number of years of work experience, contractual situation, and professional experience in years.

Leadership

Multidimensional Scale of Leadership (MSL – brief version with 27 items; Gomes et al., 2021): This scale evaluates the three leadership styles adopted by the leader that, in turn, include nine types of behaviors undertaken by the leader to achieve a certain goal in

the leadership process, being based on the Leadership Efficacy Model (Gomes, 2020). The three styles are: (a) transformational leadership: leader influences team members' attitudes, beliefs, and values to stimulate their commitment and sacrifice toward a positive vision, increasing the possibility of achieving outstanding results above those expected under typical circumstances; (b) transactional leadership: leader influences team members based on a trading system where the leader establishes the tasks and goals to achieve and the followers accept the goals and do the tasks in exchange of some psychological or material compensation; and (c) decision-making leadership: leader influences based on how power and authority are assumed by the leader that can be more actively (the leader centralized the decision on themselves or decentralized the decisions in team members) or passively (the leader avoids making decisions). Transformational leadership includes nine leadership behaviors: (a) vision: indicates the leader's tendency to direct team members towards a challenging and constructive future ($\alpha = 0.91$, for this study); (b) inspiration: indicates the leader's tendency to instill a desire for success and commitment in team members to accomplish their tasks ($\alpha = 0.85$, for this study); (c) instruction: indicates the leader's tendency to provide positive guidance to employees to correct mistakes and improve their skills ($\alpha = 0.832$ for this study); (d) individualization: indicates the leader's tendency to consider the needs, desires, and expectations of the team members ($\alpha = 0.81$, for this study); (e) support: indicates the leader's tendency to care about the well-being of the employees and assume an interest in creating genuine and strong relationships with the employees ($\alpha = 0.74$, for this study). Transactional leadership includes two dimensions: (f) positive feedback: indicates the leader's tendency to acknowledge and reinforce the employees' good efforts and behaviors ($\alpha = 0.81$, for this study); (g) negative feedback: indicates the leader's tendency to express displeasure and frustration when the employees' efforts and behaviors are unacceptable or below expectations ($\alpha = 0.87$, for this study). Decision-making leadership includes two dimensions: (h) active management: indicates the leader's tendency to make decisions and manage power, which can be more decentralized (higher values in this dimension) or more centralized (lower values in this dimension) ($\alpha = 0.83$, for this study); (i) passive management: indicates the leader's tendency to avoid decision-making and distance from responsibilities when a problem arises ($\alpha = 0.60$, for this study). In this study, it was applied the version for the employees that evaluates their direct leader. The items were answered using a five-point Likert scale (1 = *Never*; 5 = *Always*). The subscale's scores were obtained through the mean of the results of each nine leadership behaviors; higher scores on each subscale suggested a greater frequency of the leadership behavior. Then, the Optimal Profile of Leadership Index (OPLI) was calculated to test the goals of this study; this score was obtained by averaging the nine dimensions' results, being the dimensions of negative feedback and passive management reversed, so the higher the score, the greater tendency of leaders to use the optimal profile of leadership according to the employees. Confirmatory factorial analysis indicated acceptable properties for this study ($\chi^2(285) = 604.870$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.122$; RMSEA = 0.078, SRMR = 0.0674; 90% C.I.]0.69,0.87[, $p_{close} = .000$; TLI = 0.892; CFI = 0.913).

Leadership Cycles Questionnaire (LCQ – brief version with 9 items; Gomes et al., 2022): This instrument evaluates the consistency of the leader's philosophy, practice, and criteria based on the Leadership Efficacy Model (Gomes, 2020). Specifically, the instrument evaluates three dimensions (a) leadership philosophy: ideas, values, attitudes, principles, and goals about what leadership and being a leader is ($\alpha = 0.86$ for this study);

(b) leadership practice: behaviors assumed by the leaders when managing their teams and which aim to achieve the leadership philosophy ($\alpha = 0.90$, for this study); (c) leadership criteria: specific criteria used by the leaders to monitor the fulfilling of leadership philosophy and practice ($\alpha = 0.91$, for this study). These three dimensions occur in two cycles: (a) conceptual cycle: evaluates how the leader intends to act as a leader in terms of leadership philosophy, practice, and criteria; (b) practical cycle: evaluates how the leader carries out the leadership philosophy, practice, and criteria and how these elements are perceived by employees in a daily basis. The items were answered on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *Never*; 5 = *Always*). Both cycles can be calculated for leadership philosophy, practice, and criteria by averaging the results. Then, the Leadership Cycles Congruence Index (LCCI) was calculated to test the goals of this study; this score was obtained by calculating the difference between the conceptual and the practical cycles and transforming the results into a modular variable, by transforming the negative values into their positive equivalent, so values closer to zero indicate greater congruence between the cycles. Confirmatory factorial analysis indicated acceptable properties for this study ($\chi^2(20) = 40.114$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.006$; RMSEA = 0.074, SRMR = 0.0263; 90% C.I.]0.040, 0.170[, $p_{close} = .112$; TLI = 0.976; CFI = 0.987).

Leadership Antecedent Factors Questionnaire (LAFQ; Gomes et al., 2022): This instrument evaluates the factors that can influence the leadership being based on the Leadership Efficacy Model (Gomes, 2020). Specifically, the antecedent factors can maximize or minimize the leader's actions, meaning they can facilitate or inhibit the leadership efficacy. The LAFQ includes five dimensions: (a) leader - task orientation: the leader's interest in technical and productive aspects, focusing on reaching goals and enhancing performance ($\alpha = 0.88$, for this study); (b) leader - people orientation: the leader's interest in the team's personal aspects, including their expectations and needs ($\alpha = 0.84$, for this study); (c) team members - technical maturity: the team's level of knowledge and skills about their tasks and goals ($\alpha = 0.76$, for this study); (d) team members - psychological maturity: the team's level of confidence and acceptance towards the established tasks ($\alpha = 0.67$, for this study); and (e) situation: the external factors that can influence the leader's action, specifically the organization's conditions, leader's autonomy to delegate tasks and make decisions, and the probability of the leader setting goals for the team to reach ($\alpha = 0.79$, for this study). The items were answered on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *Never*; 5 = *Always*). The scores of each dimension were obtained through the mean of the results. Then, the Leadership Favorability Index (LFI) was calculated to test the goals of this study; this score was obtained by averaging the results in the five dimensions. Confirmatory factorial analysis indicated acceptable properties for this study ($\chi^2(80) = 118.812$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 1.485$; RMSEA = 0.051, SRMR = 0.0468; 90% C.I.]0.030, 0.070[, $p_{close} = .436$; TLI = 0.960; CFI = 0.970).

Conflict Management

Conflict Management Styles Questionnaire (CMSQ – version with 15 items; Gomes, 2023): This instrument evaluates people's conflict management styles. The scale includes five conflict management styles: (a) hesitant: the person does not assume a position in conflict management situations and has no response when necessary ($\alpha = 0.84$, in this study); (b) benevolent: the person overvalues others' opinions, even if it goes against their own interests in order to not damage relationships with others ($\alpha = 0.78$, in this study); (c) competitive: the person assumes a self-centered conflict management position by

imposing their opinions to the other persons ($\alpha = 0.91$, in this study); (d) transactional: the person seeks the best solution for everyone involved by negotiating a position where both parts yield until they reach a solution that is reasonable for both parties ($\alpha = 0.78$, in this study); (e) transformational: the person seeks the best solution for everyone by negotiating creative and innovative strategies to deal with the conflict ($\alpha = 0.84$, in this study). The items were answered on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*). The scores were obtained by averaging the results according to each dimension. Confirmatory factorial analysis indicated acceptable properties for this study ($\chi^2(77) = 147.218$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 1.912$; RMSEA = 0.070, SRMR = 0.0774; 90% C.I.]0.053,0.088[, $pclose = .029$; TLI = 0.944; CFI = 0.959).

All instruments used in this study were applied in the version for employees asking them to evaluate their managers in terms of leadership (e.g., MSL, LCQ, and LAFQ) and the way their leaders manage conflicts (CMSQ).

2.4. Data Collection Procedure

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Research in Social and Human Sciences at the Universidade do Minho (CEICSH 128/2020). Data collection was conducted using the Qualtrics platform. First, the organization was contacted to explain the goals of the study and have their permission to contact the participants for this study. The participants were contacted to explain the study's purpose, the data confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation in the study. After providing consent, participants completed the evaluation protocol. The questionnaire link and QR codes were distributed via the organization's e-mail system and through QR codes displayed in every unit. A total of 296 employees were invited to participate, resulting in 185 responses (63.5% return rate).

2.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The preliminary data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (v. 29) and IBM SPSS AMOS (v. 29; SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, EUA).

Data analysis followed six main steps. First, data was screened for normality and multicollinearity assumptions, outliers, and missing data. It was also checked violations of normality assumptions by observing the item distribution and regarding multicollinearity assumptions it was observed the VIF coefficients.

Second, it was used descriptive analysis to describe the main characteristics of the sample and to establish the number of participants and corresponding percentage that perceived that their managers should increase (values below zero), decrease (values greater than zero), or maintain (values equal to zero) the leadership cycles in the three dimensions evaluated (i.e., philosophy, practice, and criteria).

Third, Pearson correlation analysis was used to observe the relationship between the leadership cycles (i.e., Leadership Cycles Congruence variable, LCCI), the leadership styles (i.e., Optimal Profile of Leadership variable, OPLI), the antecedent factors of leadership (i.e., Leadership Favorability variable, LFI), and the conflict management styles.

Fourth, in order to test the first hypothesis of our study, we started by determining distinct perceptions by the employees about the leadership readiness of their managers. To achieve this, it was performed a cluster analysis with the k-means method, a method that divides data into meaningful groups based on similarities in responses. The variables used to constitute leadership readiness profiles were the Leadership Cycles Congruence

Index (LCCI), the Optimal Profile of Leadership Index (OPLI), and the Leadership Favorability Index (LFI). The final number of clusters was based on descriptive analysis of the number of participants in each group and the means obtained for each variable. These criteria tried to guarantee that each cluster was a good statistical representation of each leadership profile.

Fifth, after step fourth, we started to test the first hypothesis of this study (i.e., employees with higher perceptions about the leadership readiness of their managers will have better evaluations about the conflict management styles used by their managers, compared to employees with lower positive perceptions of leadership readiness perceived by their managers). For that, we used MANOVA analysis to test whether the grouping of participants into two leadership readiness profiles corresponded to differences regarding the conflict management styles attributed to their managers.

Finally, in the sixth step, we explored whether sociodemographic variables were associated with the differences in the leadership readiness profiles (clusters), testing the second hypothesis of this study (e.g., the perceptions assumed by the employees regarding the leadership readiness of their managers do not vary depending on the employees' personal and professional variables). For that, we first analyzed the correlations between the leadership measures (LCCI, OPLI, and LFI) and the personal and professional variables of the employees. Whenever the results indicated potential associations between the leadership variables and the age and contract type of employees, a chi-square test was used to examine the relationship between leadership profiles readiness and contract type, while a t-test was conducted to compare age across clusters. The contract type variable is divided into permanent and fixed-term.

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary Data Analysis

Variables' skewness and kurtosis were analyzed and there were no severe deviations from normality ($-.357 > sk < .858$; $-.159 > ku < 1.658$). Values of VIF (all values < 5) indicate no multicollinearity among variables.

4.2. Sample Characterization

The sample included 125 men (67.6%) and 52 women (28.1%), and 8 people (4.3%) preferred not to answer the question. The age was between 19 and 67 ($M = 38.14$; $SD = 10.94$). The contractual terms were: 41 (22.2%) on fixed-term contracts and 143 (77.3%) on permanent contracts. The average number of years of experience was 10.95 years old (min. = 0.00, max. = 49.00; $SD = 11.31$).

4.3. Leadership Cycles

In the analysis described in Table 1, the leadership cycles' dimension's means were used to understand if the participants perceived that their managers should increase (values below zero), decrease (values greater than zero), or maintain (values equal to zero) the leadership cycles in the three dimensions evaluated (i.e., philosophy, practice, and criteria). The majority of participants indicated that their managers should increase their behaviors across all three dimensions, with values ranging between 58 and 51%, which reinforces the perceived need for leaders to improve how leadership is enacted. This result suggests that most of the participants think that managers should transmit better their leadership philosophy, enhancing the behaviors that are aligned with the

philosophy and creating more transparent criteria to evaluate leadership philosophy and practice. It should be highlighted that a significant percentage of participants believed that their managers should maintain their leadership across all three dimensions, with values ranging between 42 and 37%. Only a minority of participants perceived that their managers should decrease their leadership across all three dimensions with values ranging between 7 and 5%).

Table 1 - Leadership Cycles: Evaluation of Philosophy, Practice, and Criteria

ICCL: Leadership cycles	Increase n (%)	Decrease n (%)	Maintain n (%)
LCQ: Leadership philosophy	107 (58%)	9 (5%)	68 (37%)
LCQ: Leadership practice	95 (52%)	11 (6%)	78 (42%)
LCQ: Leadership criteria	93 (51%)	13 (7%)	78 (42%)

4.4. Correlations between Variables

The Leadership Cycles Congruence variable (LCCI) exhibits negative correlations with the Optimal Profile of Leadership variable (OPLI) and the Leadership Favorability variable (LFI). This suggests that a higher participant perception of the incongruence of leadership cycles is associated with a lower participant perception of the utilization of the optimal leadership profile and a lower perceived leadership favorability of their leaders. On the other hand, the Optimal Profile of Leadership variable exhibits a strong and positive correlation with the Leadership Favorability variable. This means that a higher participant perception of the utilization of the optimal leadership profile is associated with a greater perceived leadership favorability of their leaders.

Regarding conflict management styles, in general, all dimensions correlated positively with each other, although not all results were significant. Then, the LCCI correlated both positively with the hesitant and the competitive conflict management styles and negatively with the transformational conflict management style, which means that a higher perceived incongruence of leadership cycles is associated with higher use of the hesitant and competitive conflict management styles, and lower use of the transformational conflict management styles. The OPLI correlated positively with the transformational conflict management style and negatively with the hesitant and competitive conflict management styles, which means that a higher perceived utilization of the optimal leadership profile is associated with higher utilization of the transformational conflict management style and lower utilization of the hesitant and competitive conflict management styles. Finally, the LFI correlated negatively with the hesitant and competitive conflict management styles and correlated positively with the transformational conflict management style, which means that a higher perceived leadership favorability of the managers is associated with lower use of the hesitant and competitive conflict management styles and higher use of the transformational conflict management style.

Table 2 - Correlations between Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Leadership							
1. LCQ-LCCI: Cycles	--						
2. MSL-OPLI: Styles	-.684**	--					
3. LAFQ-LFI: Anteced.	-.480**	.724**	--				
Conflict Manag. Styles							
4. CMSQ: Hesitant	.193**	-.302**	-.170*	--			
5. CMSQ: Benevolent	.081	-.090	-.045	.699**	--		
6. CMSQ: Competitive	.288**	-.468**	-.285**	.650**	.473**	--	
7. CMSQ: Transactional	-.107	.139	.090	.283**	.518**	.260**	--
8. CMSQ: Transformat.	-.224**	.403**	.354**	.103	.297**	-.081	.540**

4.5. Leadership Profiles Analysis

In this step, we started to test the first hypothesis of this study. Based on cluster analysis with the k-means method, it was chosen the two profile method: clustered superior leadership readiness (i.e., identified higher levels of leadership readiness in all scores of LCCI, OPLI, and LFI) and clustered inferior leadership readiness (i.e., identified lower levels of leadership readiness in all scores of LCCI, OPLI, and LFI). This method ensures the well-balanced distribution of the participants. Table 3 presents the results from the descriptive analysis of each cluster (profile). Participants in the clustered superior leadership readiness assumed a more positive perception of their managers in all of the dimensions when compared with the clustered inferior leadership readiness, except for the Leadership Cycles Congruence Index (LCCI).

Table 3 - Leadership Profiles: Distribution of Participants by Clusters

Leadership Readiness Profiles	<i>n</i>	LCCI <i>M (SD)</i>	OPLI <i>M (SD)</i>	LFI <i>M (SD)</i>
Clustered Superior Leadership	110	.28; .34	4.02; .43	4.27; .35
Clustered Inferior Leadership	73	1.37; .84	2.87; .50	3.51; .43

4.6. Differences in the Conflict Management Styles According to the Leadership Profiles

In this section, it was tested the first hypothesis of this study (i.e., employees with higher perceptions about the leadership readiness of their managers will have better evaluations about the conflict management styles used by their managers, compared to employees with lower positive perceptions of leadership readiness perceived by their managers). In simple words, we tested if perceiving leadership readiness more or less positively was related to the perception of conflict management styles used by managers.

The results showed that the profiles have a statistically significant relationship with the following dimensions of conflict management: hesitant ($F(1, 174) = 8.965, p < .001, \eta^2 = .049$), competitive ($F(1, 174) = 32.443, p < .001, \eta^2 = .157$), and transformational ($F(1, 174) = 12.505, p < .001, \eta^2 = .067$). More specifically, the participants in the clustered superior leadership readiness attributed lower levels of hesitant conflict management style

to their managers ($M = 2.16$, $SD = .1.16$), lower levels of competitive management style ($M = 2.20$, $SD = .1.15$), and higher levels of transformational conflict management style ($M = 3.46$, $SD = .95$), compared to the participants of the clustered inferior leadership readiness who exhibited higher values for both the hesitant conflict management style ($M = 2.70$, $SD = .98$) and the competitive management style ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.06$), and lower levels for the transformational conflict management style ($M = 3.01$, $SD = .78$). The benevolent (clustered superior leadership readiness: $M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.00$; clustered inferior leadership readiness: $M = 2.35$, $SD = .86$) and transactional (clustered superior leadership readiness: $M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.04$; clustered inferior leadership readiness: $M = 2.71$, $SD = .72$) conflict management style had no significant differences.

4.7. Differences in the Leadership Profiles According to Sociodemographic Variables

In this section, it was tested the second hypothesis of this study. To test this hypothesis, we first analyzed the potential associations between the leadership variables and the sociodemographic variables of the participants. Results indicated associations between the leadership variables and the age and contract type of employees, and not with other sociodemographic variables (as is the case of sex). Consequently, a chi-square test was used to examine the relationship between leadership profiles readiness and contract type, while a t-test was conducted to compare age across clusters. The contract type variable is divided into permanent and fixed-term.

For both variables, the results were not statistically significant (age: $t = -1.90$, $p = .06$; contract type: $\chi^2(1) = 2.59$, $p = .11$), suggesting that the differences observed in the leadership readiness clusters (when testing the first hypothesis) cannot be attributed to participants' sociodemographic characteristics.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to analyze the relationship between the followers' perception of the managers' leadership readiness and the conflict management styles used by those managers. In other words, the purpose was to investigate whether the followers' higher perception of leadership readiness was associated with a better evaluation of the conflict management style used by the managers. Additionally, it was assessed whether followers' perceptions of leadership varied according to their personal and professional characteristics, such as age, gender, educational background, and contract type. The results of the study revealed several important aspects that should be highlighted and discussed, providing new perspectives on the complex dynamic of leadership and conflict management from the followers' point of view.

Firstly, regarding leadership cycles, the results indicated that the majority of participants perceived that managers should increase their behaviors in the three dimensions evaluated: leadership philosophy, practice, and criteria. This means that, according to the perception of participants of this study, the managers can increase their leadership efficacy if they define better their values, attitudes, and goals about leadership and being a leader (philosophy); understood what behaviors they should adopt to follow their philosophy (practice); and identified which standards they wanted to use to monitor their leadership philosophy and practice (criteria). This result highlights the importance of analyzing leadership cycles because they may influence the interactions between followers and managers (Alves et al., 2021). It is quite interesting from our results that more than

half of the participants considered that their managers should turn more clear their leadership, allowing us to suppose a discrepancy between the leadership from the perspective of the leaders and the perceived leadership from the perspective of the followers. This can suppose a gap between the intentions and behaviors of the leaders, reinforcing the difficulties in translating intention into daily actions of the leaders' activity (Sheeran and Webb, 2016). This may be related to the fact that managers' leadership practices depend on the organization's procedures, policies, and regulations, as suggested by Akanji et al. (2018).

Secondly, Hypothesis 1 (H1) was confirmed, meaning that participants' perception of the leaders' conflict management style varies according to their perception of leadership readiness. More specifically, participants who perceived higher levels of leadership readiness in their managers, when compared to the participants that perceived less leadership readiness in their managers, attributed higher levels of transformational conflict management style to their managers and lower levels of hesitant and competitive conflict management styles to their managers. These results are important due to the differential effects usually attributed to these conflict management styles. For example, Saeed et al. (2014) found that the transformational leadership style was positively related to constructive conflict management styles and negatively related to destructive conflict management styles. In addition, this leadership style is positively related to the motivation, satisfaction, and performance of followers (Gasper, 1992). On the other hand, Pizzolitto et al. (2023) state that in the authoritarian leadership style, leaders display a more competitive behavior, using power and authority to resolve conflict and impose their ideas which can lead to creating insecurity and deconstructing teamwork and cooperation (Hicks et al., 1976). In this line of thought, the dominating style of conflict management has similar characteristics to the competitive conflict management style. People who assume the dominating style show a high degree of concern for their own opinions and a low level of concern for others, pushing the situation to gain something or to impose their own opinion (To et al., 2021). This style is associated with an inflexible approach and aggressive attitudes (Saragih et al., 2015). Regarding the avoidance in conflict management styles, there are indications that can lead to negative employee perceptions (Desivilya & Yagil, 2005; Roloff & Ifert, 2000, cited by Yang & Li, 2017). This idea is in line with the results of our study because less positive perceptions of leadership are associated with high levels of the hesitant conflict management style, which is characterized by a lack of attitude and avoidance of making decisions to resolve conflict. Besides, our data seems to suggest that the managers that used more positive conflict management styles (more transformational, less competitive, and less hesitant) may indeed use more collaborative conflict management styles. Also important, data from research indicates that the ability of leaders to manage conflicts can indeed improve the work conditions. For example, there is evidence that better forms of conflict management are to the capacity to solve problems and deal with changes (Mckibben, 2017), the reducing of the workplace bullying (Blomberg et al., 2025), the higher levels of team cohesion and lower levels of stress (González-García et al., 2025), and the augment of performance and creativity (Banerjee & Malik, 2025). The data of our study still add new knowledge to current research due the fact that data was theoretically driven by using the Leadership Efficacy Model. This model is an integrative framework that encompasses three concepts related to leadership (e.g., leadership cycles, leadership styles, and antecedent factors of leadership) which allows to create a single score related to leadership readiness. To the best of our knowledge, this is

the first time that it is created a single factor of leadership readiness in studies using this model which, in turn, was related to conflict management. This option allows for discoveries on leadership quality and its impact on conflict management by also providing practical and theoretical applications. Equally important, by demonstrating the differential relations between leadership readiness and the leaders' conflict management styles, our study raises the possibility that the actions assumed by the leaders can be contributive to distinct working conditions given to employees that, in turn, can influence their health and wellbeing. In fact, it is quite distinct to have managers that tend to rely on transformational conflict management style and managers that tend to use higher levels of hesitant and competitive conflict management styles. These different conflict management styles can produce more or less work environments based on leadership readiness, meaning that this ability can influence work conditions and employees' adaptation to work, as suggested by literature (Bregenzer et al., 2019; Gurt et al., 2011; Jiménez et al., 2017; Pescud et al., 2015).

Thirdly, Hypothesis 2 (H2) was also confirmed, meaning that the leadership readiness profiles do not vary according to the followers' personal and professional characteristics (e.g., age, gender, type of contract, academic degree). This finding reinforces hypothesis 1 ensuring that the differences observed in the perception of leadership readiness were not due to these variables. It is crucial to highlight that this result does not mean that men and women, or older and younger people, for example, do not perceive leadership differently, but it does demonstrate that, in our study, the differences in perception of leadership readiness of managers were not due to these sociodemographic variables. Some studies demonstrate that demographic factors influence the choice of conflict management styles, more specifically, age and experience seem to have a strong positive correlation with the collaborating conflict management style (Sahu & Pathardikar, 2015).

6. Conclusion

This study has several methodological limitations that should be considered when analyzing its results and conclusions. Firstly, this is a single measure study, i.e. all the data was collected at a single point in time. Because of this design, it is not possible to establish causal relationships between the variables analyzed in this study. Secondly, the sample used in this study consists of industrial workers, thus limiting the study's conclusions, as they cannot be generalized and applied to other contexts. Thirdly, the data obtained relies on employees' self-reported perceptions, which introduces potential biases. The subjective nature of the data may not provide the most accurate reflection of behaviors or conditions because responses can be influenced by social desirability bias, personal beliefs, or misunderstanding of the questions. Finally, no objective or observational measures were included to confirm the information and increase the reliability of the results.

For future studies, we suggest using a more comprehensive and representative sample, both in terms of nature and number of participants; a larger and more diverse sample makes it possible to generalize the conclusions to a wider range of contexts and realities. In addition, collecting data at different points in time, through longitudinal studies or repeated measures, makes it possible to draw more robust conclusions, particularly cause-effect relationships between variables. It would also be highly beneficial to compare the perceptions of managers and followers, in order to have as complete a database as possible. This comparison would highlight if there were discrepancies between how the

leadership is conducted and how it is perceived. In summary, these recommendations can make future studies more comprehensive and insightful regarding leadership, conflict management, and their impact in the organizational context.

Regarding the practical implications of the present study, it is important to highlight the relevance of leadership training as a key driving force for conflict management in organizations. Furthermore, since conflict management is one of the core skills of a leader and poorly managed conflict can decrease the organizational performance (Naqvi & Anjum, 2024), it is essential to train leaders in conflict management and how to take advantage of it. Data reinforces this idea, by indicating that organizations can improve work conditions by providing training in conflict management because it can help to develop effective communication, shared problem solving, relationships base on compromise and support (Al Kabbani & Dalati, 2025) and ultimately can even enhance the organizational performance (Usendok et al., 2022). Our study also demonstrates the importance of adopting an integrated and holistic approach when researching leadership, by using models such as the Leadership Efficacy Model, since It brings together a variety of behaviors and thus analyses the efficacy of leadership (i.e. it doesn't focus on just one aspect, since leadership is a complex process that deserves attention, both in organizations and in research). Finally, it is also very important to study the impact of new working methods, such as working from home and hybrid working, on the process of leadership and conflict management, as these are major changes in the way people collaborate and communicate. Also, as managers and employees are not always face-to-face, these processes have to be adapted on both sides, building trust and learning how to communicate through a device.

All in all, existing literature demonstrates that leadership can impact not only the employees job satisfaction but also their wellbeing both in a positive (Sonntag et al., 2023) or negative way (Harms et al., 2017). Our study aligns these results by demonstrating that different levels of leadership readiness relate to more or less positive conflict management styles than, can ultimately, influence the working conditions of employees. In this way, our study highlights several important aspects of leadership and conflict management that organizations can benefit from to improve their performance and employee well-being if they take them into consideration. Managers, in particular, can invest in improving their leadership behaviors and adopting more effective conflict management strategies. Followers can also benefit from these insights because both leadership and conflict management are dynamic and interactive processes where both parties need to actively participate and acknowledge to work for the success of the organization. By including both managers and followers, organizations can create a more collaborative and productive environment, contributing to good results and sustainability in the long term.

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8. Conflict of interest

The manuscript has never been published before and constitutes an original article. The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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