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Transactional Leadership Behaviours and Multidimensional Employee Wellbeing: Evidence from a South African Context

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Abstract
Employee wellbeing has emerged as primary significant strategic requirement for organisations planning long-term suitability and performance. Organisations increasingly perceive employees as important assets whose wellbeing contributes to key organisational outcomessuch as job satisfaction, work engagement and performance. Yet, limited research has empirically examined the relationship between transactional leadership behaviours and the multidimensional aspects of employee wellbeing, particularly within economically constrained and diverse cultural contexts. A cross-sectional survey was launched to investigate this relationship, with a sample of (47.1%, n=107) participants employed in the private sector, (36.65%, n=83) employed in the public sector and (16.3%, n=37) preferred not to disclose their employment sector. The results indicated that passive leadership behaviours are negatively associated with the multidimensional aspects of employee wellbeing. Whereas, contingent reward behaviours such as recognition and reinforcement of performance, are significant positive predictors of employee wellbeing. Active monitoring leadership behaviours such as punishment showed mixed effects, suggesting possible context-depended outcomes. These results contribute to leadership and wellbeing by embracing the multidimensional employee wellbeing and highlight the differential effects of transactional behaviours. Practically, the results emphasise the importance of fair, supportive and responsive leadership practices in fostering healthier and more resilient workplaces.

Keywords: Employee wellbeing, organisational outcomes, transactional leadership behaviours, and wellbeing dimensions.

Introduction

Employee wellbeing has recently become a central concern for organisational research scholars, echoing a broader shift towards recognising employees as critical for organisational sustainability and performance. Several studies demonstrate that employee wellbeing is positively associated with innovation, productivity, and organisational effectiveness, positioning it as both a moral and strategic imperative for the organisations (Roslender et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2022). The literature on employee wellbeing is largely informed by two theoretical traditions: the hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives. The hedonic perspective conceptualises wellbeing in terms of happiness, positive emotions, and life satisfaction. From this perspective, employee wellbeing reflects employees' affective evaluations of their work experiences and the extent to which work contributes to positive emotional states. By contrast, the eudaimonic perspective emphasises meaning, personal development, and self-realisation. Scholars adopting this perspective argue that wellbeing involves

fulfilling one's potential and engaging in work that provides purpose and psychological growth (Soren and Ryff, 2023).

Recent organisational research increasingly integrates these two perspectives, recognising that employee wellbeing involves both positive emotional experiences and deeper psychological fulfilment. Studies examining workplace wellbeing therefore incorporate a range of indicators including job satisfaction, psychological health, engagement, and social belonging (Kun & Gadanecz, 2022; Nunes et al., 2024). This multidimensional understanding is particularly important in organisational contexts where employees' wellbeing is shaped not only by individual experience but also by workplace structures and interpersonal relationships. Positive workplace relationships (Kun & Gadanecz, 2022; Sonnentag et al., 2023), sense of belonging, and perceptions of organisational support are consistently linked to improved employee wellbeing (Boyd &Nowell, 2023; Jaškevičiūtė & Stankevičienė, 2021). Conversely, excessive job demands, organisational conflict, and technostress can undermine employee wellbeing and contribute to burnout and psychological strain (Huhtala et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023).

As organisations increasingly operate in complex and uncertain environments, understanding mechanisms that promote or degrade employee wellbeing is essential (Kun & Gadanecz, 2022; Sonnentag et al., 2023). Among these mechanisms, leadership behaviour has emerged as a key determinant factor of employee wellbeing (Ashfan et al., 2026; Wegge et al., 2014). Leaders play a central role in shaping employees' daily work experiences through the allocation of resources, structuring of tasks, and the creation of organisational climates that either support or undermine positive psychological functioning (Aboramadan & Kundi, 2020; Ali et al., 2024). Prior research has shown that leadership influences employee wellbeing through psychological safety, perceived organisational support, and the management of job demands and resources (Berger et al., 2019; Lundqvist et al., 2022). However, despite extensive research on leadership and wellbeing, *three key gaps* remain.

First, the role of transactional leadership behaviours in shaping employee wellbeing remains insufficiently theorised and empirically examined. Transactional leadership, typified by exchange-based relations between leaders and followers, remains one of the most widely practiced leadership approaches in organisational settings where leaders clarify expectations, monitor performance, and provide rewards or corrective actions based on employee performance (Dong, 2023). It consists of *three behavioural dimensions*, which are *contingent reward* refers to the practice of rewarding employees when they meet predetermined performance expectations, set clear communication of goals, recognition of employee achievements, and performance-based incentives, *management-by-exception active* (MBEA) involves leaders actively monitoring employee performance, corrective feedback, adherence to established procedures and intervening when deviations from organisational standards occur, and *management -by-exception passive* (MBEP) commonly referred to as laissez-faire leadership, represents the most passive form of transactional leadership behaviour. Leaders adopting this approach tend to avoid decision-making and delay intervention until problems arise or performance failures become evident (Bass 1997).

These behaviours are predominantly found in performance-driven environments, where clarity, monitoring, and accountability are promoted (Alrowwad et al., 2020; Avolio& Bass, 1995; Howell & Avolio, 1993). In the context of South Africa, transactional leadership behaviours are ubiquitous due to organisational pressures related to poor accountability measures, productivity, skills shortages and resource constraints. While transactional leadership has been proven to enhance employee performance, its implications for employee wellbeing are vague and appear to be theoretically questioned. On the other hand, contingent reward behaviours may enhance wellbeing by promoting fairness, recognition, and role clarity. On the opposite hand, monitoring and corrective punishment behaviours related to MBEA and the absence of leadership related to MBEP may undermine

autonomy, increase stress and negatively affect psychological and social functioning. This dualism highlights a critical tension within transactional leadership, behaviours that drive performance may simultaneously have unintentional costs for employee wellbeing. This study addresses this gab by examining the relationship between transactional leadership behaviours (i.e., contingent reward, management-by-exception active, and management-by-exception passive) and four dimensions of employee wellbeing.

The *second* gap, existing studies have tendency to treat employee wellbeing as a secondary outcome variable and conceptualise it as a unidimensional construct. Much of the existing research focuses on singular indicators such as job satisfaction or psychological distress or burnout, while overlooking the inherently multidimensional nature of wellbeing (Inceoglu et al., 2018). This approach masks important distinctions between different dimensions of wellbeing and limits our understanding of how different leadership behaviours may differently affect these dimensions. To address this limitation, this study adopts a multidimensional perspective on employee wellbeing proposed by Pradhan and Hati (2022), which conceptulises wellbeing across *four* interrelated dimensions. These are *psychological* refers to the capacity to think clearly and function effectively under pressure (Keyes, 2002; Pradhan & Hati, 2019). It encompasses cognitive health, emotional stability, and psychological resilience (Hettler, 1980), *subjective* involves the subjective evaluation both positive and negative affects as well as general life satisfaction of one's current status (Pradhan & Hati, 2019, p396), *social* refers to the degree of feeling of belongingness and attachment towards the society, positive state of ones relationships, social stability and social peace, related to social acceptance, social actualisation, social contribution and social integration (Pradhan & Hati, 2019, p396) and *workplace wellbeing* is defined as the degree to which employees experience psychological, social and emotional health within their work environment with an emphasis on supportive relationships, meaningful work, and a sense of safety and trust (Pradhan & Hati, 2019).

This perspective allows for more nuanced analysis of how transactional leadership behaviours influence distinct facets of employee experience. For example, leadership behaviour that enhances workplace wellbeing through performance clarity may concurrently diminish psychological wellbeing by restricting employee autonomy. Examining these differences is critical for developing a more comprehensive understanding of dynamics that lie within leadership-wellbeing organisational facets. The importance of such an investigation is particularly important in the South African context.

The *third* gap is a lack of contextually grounded research in African organisational settings, particularly in South Africa, where unique socio-cultural and economic conditions may shape leadership–wellbeing relationships. South Africa represents an exceptionally complex organisational environment, distinguished by cultural diversity, socio-economic inequality, cruel historical legacy effects, and the coexistence of collectivist and individualist cultural orientations. These characteristics have a unique influence on employees' expectations of leadership and their interpretations of organisational support (Laher & Dockrat, 2019). Simultaneously, persistent structural inequalities, including high levels of poverty and unemployment, shape employees 'broader life experiences and wellbeing (Kollamparambil & Ndlovu, 2023).

Empirical evidence further, illustrates the paradoxical nature of employee wellbeing in South Africa. While a substantial number of individuals report relatively high levels of positive effect, overall life satisfaction remains comparatively low, reflecting tensions between personal resilience and systematic challenges (Bothma & Veenhoven, 2024; Veenhoven, 2025). These dynamics suggest that organisational factors, including leadership, may play a particularly important role in shaping employee wellbeingby either mitigating or exacerbating external stressors. Additionally, South African organisations face persistent challenges related to employee low staff morale, presenteeism, turnover and stress related absenteeisim, which results to significant economic and operational costs. These challenges underscore the need for leadership approaches that not only enhance performance

but also support sustainable employee wellbeing. Situating the analysis within the South African context, the study provides a more nuanced and contextually relevant understanding of leadership and wellbeing. Hence, understanding how transactional leadership behaviours operate within this context is critical for both theory and practice.

This study is well-vested within the Job Demands- Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2012; Rayan & Deci, 2017), which provide complementary perspectives on the association between leadership and wellbeing. The JD-R model suggests that employee wellbeing is modelled by the balance between job demands and availability of resources, with leadership behaviour as key in influencing both (Bakker & Mostert, 2024; Jaswal et al., 2024; Nunes et al., 2024). For instance, transactional leadership behaviours may function as both resources (i.e., through clarity and rewards; Hannah et al., 2020; Lundqvist et al., 2023) or demands (i.e., through monitoring and control), depending on how they are enacted ((Fox et al., 2022).

Similarly, SDT accentuates the importance of satisfying employee's basic needs (i.e., psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness). Leadership behaviours that support these needs are associated with heightened wellbeing (Das & Pattanayak, 2023; Salas-Vallina et al., 2021) and, whereas behaviours that undermine them may lead to reduced motivation and psychological distress (Nunes et al., 2024). From this perspective, contingent reward may support competence and relatedness, while MBEA and MBEP may undermine autonomy and psychological safety (Fosse et al., 2019; Farley et al., 2023). These findings highlight the importance of examining specific transactional leadership behaviours and their differential effects on employee wellbeing.

Collectively, these frameworks provide a robust theoretical foundation for examining how different transactional leadership behaviours may differentially influence the multidimensional employee wellbeing. Therefore, the following hypothesise are proposed:

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between contingent reward leadership behaviour and psychological, subjective, social, and workplace employee wellbeing dimensions.

H2: There is a significant negative relationship between management-by-exception active leadership behaviour and psychological, subjective, social, and workplace employee wellbeing dimensions.

H3: There is a significant negative relationship between management-by-exception passive leadership behaviour and psychological, subjective, social, and workplace employee wellbeing dimensions.

H4: Collectively, contingent reward, management-by-exception active, and management-by-exception passive leadership behaviours significantly predict a multidimensional employee wellbeing.

Methods

Procedure

This quantitative research study utilised a positivist philosophical approach with a cross-sectional survey design (Apuke, 2017; Schmidt & Brown, 2019). After obtaining ethical approval from Ethics Committee in the College of Human Sciences with a reference CA4_12022024_CREC-CHS_2024 at the University of South Africa (UNISA), recruitment was done through convenience sampling by forwarding a link from the *Qualtrics* platform where the cross-sectional online survey was hosted. The link (i.e., invitation to participate on the survey) was forwarded to emails for part time Psychology Honours students studying at UNISA, workgroup emails, and WhatsApp groups. Before completing the survey, participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and advised that participation was voluntary with the option to withdraw at any time (Psychologist, 2017). Eligible participants were adults, aged between 18-70 years, and working in South Africa. Debriefing was provided at the end of the survey; participants were thanked for their contribution and

informed that data were analysed only at group level. In total, 1,130 individuals were initially recruited. After applying exclusion criteria, that is, participants who took less than 900 seconds (15 minutes) to complete the survey, were unemployed, self-employed without accountability structures, or not working in South Africa. The final sample comprised 227 participants.

Participants

The final sample included 78 males, 142 females, six (6) participants preferred not to disclose, while 21 participants did not answer the question. On average, the participants were 37.87 of age, ranging from 19 years to 70 years, one person reported to be 19 years old, and one (1) reported to be 70 years old, while 20 participants did not indicate their age. In terms of race groups, most participants indicated their race as Black (n = 166), 29 indicated as White, followed by 13 Indian/Asian, and 13 Coloured. Two participants identified as 'other', while 4 people did not answer the question. When asked whether they were South African citizens or not, 215 answered in the affirmative, seven (7) reported to be non-South African citizens, while five (5) did not answering the question. Participants were asked if they are formally employed, 227 participants indicated that they were, however, 20 participants reported being unemployed, and 37 chose not to answer the question were excluded from analysis sample. Lastly, when asked whether they are employed in the public sector or private sector, 83 participants indicated to be employed in the public sector, with 107 participants indicating to be employed in the private sector, and the remaining 37 participants preferred not to answer the question.

Measures

All variables were measured using validated scales with an acceptable reliability (i.e., Cronbach's alpha values (α) above 0.70) from previous studies. Participants were asked to indicate their disagreement or agreement with items describing their leader using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*).

Transactional leadership behaviour was assessed using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) by Avolio et al. (1999). The scale consists of 12 items measuring three dimensions of transactional leadership behaviour. The *contingent reward behaviour* was measured by four items. E.g., "My leader 'rewards my achievement" (α = .85). *Management-by exception-active (punishment) behaviour* was measured by four items, e.g., "My leader tracks my mistakes" (α = .81). *Management-by-exception passive (laissez-fare) behaviour* was measured by four items, e.g., "My leader reacts to problems, if chronic" (α= .74).

Employee well-being was assessed using the Employee Well-being in Organisations Scale a four-dimensional scale consisting of 32 items (Pradhan & Hati, 2019). The *psychological well-being dimension* was measured by 10 items, e.g., "I feel I am capable of decision-making" (α= .71). The *social well-being dimension* was measured by 10 items, e.g., "I am an important part of my team and organization" (α= .85). The *workplace well-being dimension* was measured by 9 items like "My work achievement often acts as a source of motivation" (α= .75); while *subjective wellbeing* was measured by 3 items like "I feel good about myself" (α= .76). Demographic variables included age, gender, ethnicity, type of employment and employment sector.

Data analysis Strategy

To investigate the relationships between the three transactional leadership behaviours and four employee wellbeing dimensions, a series of statistical analyses were conducted. First, data was cleaned by addressing missing values and outliers, followed by normality checks using the Shapiro-Wilk tests (Field, 2018). The assumptions of normality and linearity were met. A correlation matrix was then generated to examine bivariate relationships between leadership behaviours and employee wellbeing dimensions. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$, with Bonferroni correction applied to control for Type I error (Pallant, 2020). Effect sizes were interpreted using Cohen's (1988) criteria ($r \geq .10$ small, $\geq .30$ medium, $\geq .50$ large).

To test the predictive relationship between three transactional leadership behaviours and employee wellbeing, a multiple regression analysis was performed. First, the four employee wellbeing dimensions were standardised and averaged into a single composite variable representing overall employee wellbeing (Field, 2018). The assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity was assessed (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019; Sarstedt & Mooi, 2014). Leadership behaviours and employee well-being dimension were measured on a continuous scale (Hayes & Rockwood, 2017; Venkataramana et al., 2016). Linearity between the dependent and independent variables was assessed using plots of residuals and predicted values. The independence of residuals was examined using the Durbin–Watson statistic, the absence of multicollinearity was ruled out where correlation coefficients among predictors were below 0.7, and the variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below 10 (Cohen et al., 2003). A multiple regression model examined whether transactional leadership behaviours significantly predicted employee wellbeing, with regression coefficients used to assess their relative contributions. Effect sizes were evaluated using R^2 (Cohen, 1988; 2003). Finally, demographic variables were analysed descriptively to provide the sample profile, but no inferential analyses were conducted in relation to the study variables.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of contingent reward behaviour, management exception active (punishment) behaviour, management-by-exception passive behaviour (laissez- faire) and each of the four-employee well-being dimensions.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	A	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Psychological wellbeing	4.43	1.01	.72	-						
Subjective wellbeing	4.32	.75	.76	.397***	-					
Social wellbeing	3.99	.68	.85	.380***	.542***	-				
Workplace wellbeing	4.44	.61	.75	.499***	.578***	.624***	-			
Contingent reward behaviour	3.74	1.10	.85	.195**	.397***	.380***	.499***	-		
Management exception active (punishment) behaviour	2.78	1.20	.81	-.053	-.085	.003	-.073	-.132*	-	
Management-by-exception passive behaviour (laissez-faire)	2.62	.902	.74	-.148*	-.278***	-.184***	-.341**	-.428***	.418***	-

*Note: *= p< .05, **= p<. 01, *** = p< .001*

The results suggested that the four employee wellbeing dimensions were positively related to each other (r_s > .380, p_s < .001). Whereas, the psychological wellbeing dimension was positively related (but marginally) to contingent rewards leadership behaviour (r = .195, p < .001) and negatively related to passive laissez-faire leadership behaviour (r = -.148, p < .05). Similarly, subjective wellbeing dimension was positively related to contingent rewards leadership behaviour (r = .397, p < .001) and negatively related to passive laissez-faire leadership behaviour (r = -.278, p < .001). This implies that psychological and subjective wellbeing thrives in environments where leaders engage in proactive positive and rewards-based actions but suffocates under passive leadership behaviours. Moreover, social wellbeing dimension was found to be positively related to contingent rewards leadership behaviour (r = .380, p < .001) and negatively related to passive laissez-faire leadership behaviour (r = -.184, p < .001). These results also suggests that social wellbeing is tightly linked with a positive workplace environment and responsive to reward-based leadership behaviour. Furthermore, workplace wellbeing dimension was positively related to contingent rewards leadership behaviour (r = .499, p < .001) and negatively related to passive laissez-faire leadership behaviour (r = -.341, p < .01). This insinuates that a proactive, supportive, and rewarding leadership behaviour enhances workplace wellbeing, whereas a punitive and laissez-faire leadership behaviours hinder it and that the leadership behaviour that rewards good performance is related and beneficial to all wellbeing dimensions.

The results also revealed that contingent rewards leadership behaviour was negatively related to punitive and passive laissez-faire leadership behaviour (r_s > -.132, p_s < .05). Indicating that leaders who actively engage on behaviours such as contingent rewards tend to avoid punitive and passive laissez-faire leadership behaviours. Interestingly, punitive leadership behaviour found to be positively related to passive laissez-faire leadership behaviour (r = .418, p < .001) possibly reflecting that both leadership behaviours are reactive in nature, neglecting responsibility to provide direction and supportive correction. Lastly, active punishment leadership behaviour does not relate to employee wellbeing dimensions and slightly negatively relate to contingent reward leadership behaviour. Implying that punitive leadership behaviour has no noticeable relationship with employee wellbeing dimensions. Whereas passive laissez-faire leadership behaviour was found to negatively relates to subjective, social, workplace and psychological wellbeing. This pattern consistently reinforced that all employee wellbeing suffer under passive leadership behaviour but it thrives under performance rewarding leadership behaviour.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of contingent reward behaviour, management exception active (punishment) behaviour, management-by-exception passive behaviour (laissez-faire) and multidimensional employee wellbeing coded as a unimodal variable.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	A	1	2	3
Employee wellbeing	4.23	0.48	.91	-		
Contingent reward behaviour	3.74	1.10	.85	.459**	-	
Management exception active (punishment) behaviour	2.78	1.20	.81	-.053	-.132*	-

*Note: *= p< .05, **= p<. 01, *** = p< .001*

The results indicated that contingent reward leadership behaviour was positively related to unimodal employee wellbeing (r = .459, p < .01), active punishment leadership behaviour was insignificantly and negatively related to employee wellbeing (r = -.053, p > .05) while passive laissez - faire leadership behaviour was significantly and negatively related to employee wellbeing (r = -.268, p < .01). Suggesting that rewards-based leadership behaviour is associated with higher employee wellbeing, while passive laissez faire leadership behaviour might be associated with unsupportive or neglect and or harmful to employee wellbeing.

In addition, passive laissez faire leadership behaviours was found to be significantly and negatively related to rewards-based leadership behaviour and employee wellbeing. Suggesting that passive leadership behaviour that shows no action, no reward, or support may lower employee wellbeing. Furthermore, active punishment leadership behaviour had a null relationship on employee wellbeing. Suggesting that punitive and passive leadership behaviours are often related but have no significant relation to employee wellbeing.

Hypotheses Testing

Table 3

Regression coefficient of contingent reward behaviour and management-by-exception passive (laissez-faire) behaviour on multidimensional employee wellbeing coded as a unimodal variable (N=224)

Variable	*B*	*SE*	T	P	95% CI
Constant	3.645	.17	21.017	<.001	[3.30, 3.99]
Contingent reward behaviour	.18	.03	6.385	<.001	[.139, 0.24]
Management-by-exception passive (laissez-faire) behaviour	-.05	.04	-1.277	.203	[-.16, 0.02]

Note: CI confidence interval

A simple linear regression analysis was performed to test whether contingent reward behaviour and passive laissez faire leadership behaviour could predict employee well-being. The employee well-being was regressed onto contingent reward behaviour and passive laissez faire leadership behaviour. The model was found to be significant, F (5,585) = 30.488, p < .001, and explained 22% of the variance in employee well-being. Furthermore, the model revealed that only contingent reward behaviour (β = .029, t = 6.385, p < .001) significantly predicted employee well-being. The results also revealed that passive laissez faire leadership behaviour negatively correlates to employee well-being and does not insignificantly predict employee wellbeing (β = -.084, t = -1.227, p >.05) (Table 3). These results imply that supportive leadership behaviour (i.e., through contingent rewards) is a strong, significant positive predictor of employee wellbeing. Although passive leadership is negatively (suggesting that more passive leadership might decrease wellbeing) related to wellbeing, this effect is not significant in this regression model after accounting for contingent reward behaviour. The model suggests that supportive and engaging leadership matters more than simply the absence of leadership.

General Discussion

This research aimed to examine the relationship between transactional leadership behaviours and the four dimensions of employee well-being by exploring how each of the three transactional leadership

behaviours relate to each of the four dimensions of employee wellbeing. Furthermore, the research aimed to understand establish whether leadership behaviours predict employee wellbeing. Results showed that leadership behaviours that are punitive or passive negatively relates to employee well-being. In contrast, it was also found that leadership behaviour that rewards and recognises employee efforts positively relates and predicts employee well-being. More specifically, *first*, the study proposed a significant positive relationship between contingent reward leadership behaviour and the four dimensions of employee wellbeing. The results supported the hypothesis 1 particularly workplace and subjective wellbeing. The previous research consistently demonstrates that contingent reward leadership behaviour was positively related to job satisfaction (Handayani et al., 2022; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Khan et al., 2021; Salas-Vallina et al., 2021) but less impactful than transformational leadership (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). This relationship is crucial, as employee wellbeing directly impacts organisational factors such as engagement, productivity, retention, and overall organisational health (Harter et al., 2002; Daouk et al., 2021). This aligns with the view that employee well-being is positively influenced by organisational factors which employees find valuable such as rewards (Danna & Griffin, 1999). These rewards are perceived to be most beneficial in promoting well-being (Molnár et al., 2024). Moreover, contingent reward leadership behaviour was found to better predictor of employee wellbeing when compared to passive lesser faire leadership, but transactional leadership behaviours were generally found to reduce intrinsic motivation over time (Skogstad et al., 2007).

Second, this study also proposed a significant negative relationship between management by exception active punishment leadership behaviour and the four dimensions of employee wellbeing. The results did not support the hypothesis 2. Instead, a null relationship between active punishment leadership behaviour and employee wellbeing was found. This means that active punishment behaviour neither supports nor significantly harms employee wellbeing, though the slight negative trends suggest it's not helpful. All r values were near zero or slightly negative (e.g., psychological $r = –.053$). Early research showed that active punishment leadership behaviour had a neutral to slightly negative effect on employee morale compared to transformational leadership (Bass, & Avolio, 1994). While active punishment leadership behaviour is generally perceived as harmful/toxic to most wellbeing types (Van Sung & Savaspakdee, 2021), Wang and Howell, (2012) found it to be positively linked to compliance but not enhanced well-being or engagement. Stander and Coxen (2017) demonstrated that active (punishment) leadership behaviour involving active monitoring could enhance safety compliance in high-risk industries like mining but also increased employee stress when overused. The null relationship with employee wellbeing dimensions may reflect a perceived sense of autonomy or reduced pressure or somehow related to the existing workplace polices in the context of South Africa. South Africa is known for having good constitution and labour law creating a safety net for employees. But this may also signal measurement or contextual factors worth exploring further.

Third, this research proposed a significant negative relationship between management by exception passive (laissez-faire) leadership behaviour and the four dimensions of employee wellbeing. The results supported the hypothesis 3. Passive laissez-faire leadership behaviour negatively relates to the four dimensions of employee wellbeing. The results suggest that it is highly likely that leaders who only take corrective action once requirements aren't satisfied tend to have employees with displays lower levels of employee wellbeing. These results are consistent with previous studies. Passive laissez-faire leadership behaviour was found to be associated with lower job satisfaction, higher turnover intentions and negatively related to employee wellbeing while increasing stress and burnout (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008; Kelloway et al., 2012; Lundmark et al., 2022; Robert & Vandenberghe, 2022). Similarly, laissez-faire leadership behaviour, was hound to correlates with low morale, absenteeism, and burnout (Dartey-Baah & Ampofo, 2016; Tse & Chiu, 2014). In high-power-distance cultures like South Africa, employees expect clear guidance and strong leadership, making passive leadership especially damaging.

Finally, the research proposed that all the three leadership behaviours significantly predict employee well-being. The model results were significant and partially supported hypothesis 4, only contingent reward behaviour significantly predicted employee well-being, whereases, passive lasser faire leadership behaviour negatively correlates to employee well-being and does not insignificantly predict employee wellbeing. These results imply that supportive leadership behaviour (through contingent rewards) is a strong, significant positive predictor of employee wellbeing. Although passive leadership is negatively (suggesting that more passive leadership might decrease wellbeing) related to wellbeing, this effect is not significant in this regression model after accounting for contingent reward behaviour. The model suggests that supportive and engaging leadership matters more than simply the absence of leadership.

Implications and contributions

The results of the study contribute to the limited body of research on transactional leadership behaviour and employee wellbeing in South Africa providing both theoretical and practical insights. It demonstrates that contingent reward behaviours, i.e., where leaders recognise and reward employee efforts, are the most effective in enhancing well-being across multiple dimensions. In contrast, passive (laissez-faire) leadership behaviours undermine well-being, while active punishment showed little direct effect. The findings have several important implications. *First,* it highlights the importance of supportive recognition-based leadership as a significant predictor of employee well-being. This underscores the need for organisations to cultivate leadership practices that prioritise engagement, recognition, and meaningful rewards. By doing so, organisations can improve employee satisfaction, motivation, and resilience, all of which are factors that contribute to productivity, citizenship behaviour, and long-term competitiveness. *Second,* the study suggests that organisations should carefully manage the risks of passive leadership. In high-power-distance contexts like South Africa, employees expect guidance and direction. When this is absent, well-being declines. Leadership development programmes should therefore emphasise active engagement, balanced monitoring, and trust-based management rather than excessive control. *Finally*, the study contributes to organisational policy and practice by showing how leadership selection, training, and retention strategies can be designed to promote employee well-being. Incorporating contingent reward behaviours into leadership development, aligning reward systems with employee values, and embedding well-being considerations into performance management can create healthier, more productive workplaces.

Limitations and Future research

The study has several limitations that future research should address. First, its cross-sectional design and convenience sampling limit causal interpretations and generalisability. Longitudinal designs and random sampling would provide stronger evidence of the relationships between transactional leadership behaviours and employee well-being. Second, the relatively small and uneven sample highlights the need for larger, more representative studies that capture the diversity that is reflective of the South African workforce. Additionally, a notable number of invalid responses needed to be excluded, suggesting that clearer communication about voluntary participation and the research procedures may improve data quality in future studies. It also needs to be mentioned that this study examined transactional leadership behaviours and workplace well-being without considering potential moderating, mediating, and confounding variables that may shape these relationships. Factors such as organisational climate, workplace bullying, and the quality of corrective action may play important roles and should be explored in greater depth. A more nuanced assessment of leaders' monitoring behaviour and corrective practices would also provide richer insights into their impact on employee outcomes.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on employee wellbeing by demonstrating how transactional leadership behaviours, particularly contingent rewards, influence employee wellbeing within the South African context. The findings suggest that supportive behaviours such as recognising and rewarding employee contributions enhance well-being, while management-by-exception, especially laissez-faire approaches, tends to undermine it. Given South Africa's unique socio-economic and cultural challenges, these insights underscore the importance of leadership strategies that balance performance management with the mental, emotional, and social needs of employees. By improving the use of contingent reward behaviours and reducing the reliance on punitive or passive approaches, organisations can foster healthier, more resilient, and productive workforces. Future research should build on these findings to offer actionable guidance for leaders and HR practitioners seeking to align organisational performance with employee well-being.

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