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Exploring mid-level leaders' perceptions of organisational culture at cash management company

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Orientation: Mid-level leadership has an important role to play in driving organisational culture for effective organisational functioning.

Research purpose: This study aimed to examine the perceptions of mid-level leaders in a cash management company in South Africa on their influence on organisational culture.

Motivation for the study: While studies have been conducted on leadership and organisational culture within various sectors of the South African economy, the cash management industry has been commonly overlooked, despite the essential role played by these organisations.

Research approach/design and method: This study followed a qualitative research approach. A purposive sample of 12 mid-level leaders was interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis was used to extract themes.

Main findings: The main finding revealed that mid-level leaders primarily influenced organisational culture as they met operational goals and second by encouraging employee development, safety and risk management, compliance, information sharing and personal interaction. Other emergent themes included perceived challenges to the organisation's culture and prominent strengths of the organisation's culture.

Practical/ managerial implication: This study shows the role that mid-level leadership has to drive organisational culture. Organisations should therefore use mid-level leaderships' insight into strengthening organisational culture.

Contribution/ value add: This study supports the role of mid-level leaders and their influence on fostering an organisation's desired cultural outcomes. A conceptual model of culture enablement adds to the understanding of organisational culture and strengthens the study's contribution to the body of knowledge.

Keywords: cash management; culture enablement; mid-level leadership; organisational culture; leadership roles.

Introduction

Organisational culture is widely recognised as a key factor in differentiating organisations from one another (Schein, 2010; Xenikou & Furnham, 2022). A significant area of research focuses on the role of leadership in fostering organisational culture (Khan et al., 2020; Schein, 2009, 2018; Xenikou & Furnham, 2022), and it is known that leadership plays a crucial role in shaping organisational culture (Schein, 2010). Organisational culture is regarded as a crucial tool for improving effectiveness and relevance (Groysberg et al., 2018). A distinctive organisational culture is a critical asset for organisations seeking to build integrated capabilities that resonate with employees (Denison et al., 2012).

Leaders can also impact organisational culture through their behaviour, which can either hinder or support the organisation's performance (Groysberg et al., 2018; Nohria, 2022). Leaders can further shape organisational culture by articulating the company's vision (Belias & Koustelios, 2014; Lasrado & Kassem, 2021) and formulating strategy (Kaul, 2019). By demonstrating the desired cultural characteristics through their behaviour, leaders can reinforce the alignment of employees with the organisation (Katzenbach et al., 2016).

While studies have been conducted on the leadership and organisational cultures of higher education institutions, the public service sector, health care sector and financial institutions (Chipunza & Matsumunyane, 2018; Frantz et al., 2020; Jivan, 2020; Mokgolo et al., 2012; Stander et al., 2015), the cash management sector that deals with cash movement has not garnered

particular interest. This is despite the essential role of cash management organisations and their contribution to sustaining the economy of South Africa as they ensure cash circulation within South Africa.

Purpose

The relationship between leadership and organisational culture is well established (Katzenbach et al., 2016; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Schein, 2009; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). To date, much of the empirical research conducted has been centered around senior or executive-level leadership (Jaser, 2021). However, it is essential to recognise that leadership at all levels plays a significant role in promoting and establishing a desirable culture (Daft, 2018; Jaser, 2021; Northouse, 2020; Schein, 2018). The organisation under examination hosts annual leadership conferences that address the leadership role within the context of the organisation's operations. Despite these efforts, there is limited understanding, through empirical means, of the perceived responsibilities of mid-level leaders towards the organisation's people and culture. This qualitative study aims to shed light on the mid-level leaders' perceptions of their ability to impact the organisational culture within a cash management or cash distribution company.

Transformational Leadership Theory is a prominent theoretical framework frequently used in organisational research to understand the dynamics between leaders and their followers (Duan et al., 2022; Yukl & Falbe, 1991). Early research by Bass (1985) suggests that it focuses on how leaders can inspire and motivate their subordinates to achieve exceptional performance and foster positive changes in the organisation. Transformational leaders exhibit certain key behaviours, such as articulating a compelling vision, providing intellectual stimulation, offering individualised support and acting as role models for their followers (Avolio et al., 2009; Bass, 1985). These leaders emphasise the importance of shared values and a collective sense of purpose, fostering a culture of trust, within the organisation. By examining the perceptions of mid-level leaders' influence on organisational culture through the lens of the Transformational Leadership Theory, this study seeks to explore the specific behaviours of mid-level leaders that contribute to shaping and maintaining the organisational culture.

Literature review
Defining leadership

Leadership is an interactive process that takes place between a leader and a follower (Burns, 1978; Chen et al., 2007; Kellerman & Webster, 2001; Northouse, 2020) to achieve a shared outcome or objective (Gardner, 1990; Rost, 1991; Northouse, 2020) through influence, persuasion and motivation (Bass, 1985; Gardner, 1990; Rost 1991; Vroom & Jago, 2007). Leadership can, therefore, be described as the influencing process of leaders as they seek the achievement of shared objectives (Achua & Lussier, 2010; Benmira & Agboola, 2020; Daft, 2008; Northouse, 2020). Leaders' roles have been involving because of several organisational and environmental changes (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016; Nohria, 2022).

The evolving world of work is placing new demands on leaders, requiring them to navigate uncertainty and drive organisational performance (Mahapatra & Dash, 2022; Nohria, 2022). The relationship between organisational culture and performance is well established (Kotter & Heskett, 1992), but success depends on the alignment of culture with organisational strategy (Sackmann, 2023; Schein, 2017). As a result, the role of leadership is shifting, requiring leaders to be adaptable and employ a range of leadership styles to meet the needs of their organisations and employees (Hiwa et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020).

Organisational culture

An organisational culture is nebulous, embodied in unspoken elements that are understood through feelings, perceptions and experiences. Organisational culture and its subliminal characteristics play a pivotal role in shaping the success of any organisation. Culture, together with effective leadership, can ultimately lead to the improved performance of employees and the economic success of an organisation (Goldman, 2000; Groysberg et al., 2018; Hofstede et al., 2010; Schein, 1999). Furthermore, culture has been shown to be an important differentiator in an increasingly global and competitive environment (Groysberg et al., 2018; Kotter & Heskett, 1992), and versatile leadership practices are required to sustain a powerful culture in the 21st century (Nohria, 2022).

Influenced by socially constructed norms and behaviours, organisational culture can be defined as a pattern of shared assumptions (Schein, 1999). These shared assumptions are learned by employees and reflect what people 'perceive, think and feel' (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 6–8). Organisational culture thus reflects the collective programming of the mind (Hofstede, 2001; Schein, 2010), which could take the form of the heroes that people emulate, symbols that provide meaning, rituals that contribute to social acceptance and the values that are shared through common experiences (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Shared assumptions (Schein, 1999) also reflect an organisation's paradigm, which consists of core beliefs and motivations (Johnson, 1992) that drive employee choices. An organisational paradigm provides the context in which the culture exists and extends to the way the organisation is structured to achieve individual roles and accountability. It includes the formal and informal power structures that define the strategic direction, the control systems that manage employee and organisational performance and the stories or myths that are reflected in the organisation history (Johnson, 1992).

Leadership influence on organisational culture

Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping and maintaining the culture of an organisation (Semordzi, 2018). According to Hofstede (1994), Kotter and Heskett (1992) and Schein (2010), leaders are responsible for not only instilling culture through the founding members' beliefs and values but also for guiding the change and evolution of existing cultures.

Their behaviours and actions can articulate and demonstrate the vision, mission and values of an organisation. In doing so, it positively influences its culture (Katzenbach et al., 2016).

Leaders possess certain behavioural traits that can have an impact on an organisation's performance (Kotter & Cohen, 2002; Schein, 2018; Nohria, 2022). Irrespective of their hierarchical level, leaders must continually create, manage and evolve the overall corporate culture and various subcultures (Schein, 1999). While a leader may choose to 'give in' to the existing culture and relinquish their beliefs in favour of it (Schein, 2009), it is more effective for leaders to 'evolve' the existing culture by mastering the forces that bring about its evolution (Chima & Gutman, 2020). New leaders should take the time to understand the existing dynamics and gradually implement new rules and behaviours that align with different values, beliefs and norms (Newman & Ford, 2021; Schein, 2009).

Power and influence are important considerations in understanding behaviour and leadership effectiveness (Anderson & Sun, 2017; Mintzburg, 1984; Pfeffer, 1992; Yukl & Falbe, 1991). When considering the nature of cultures, including their values, beliefs and behaviours (Schein, 2009), personal power is deemed a key attribute that leaders should cultivate in order to have a sustainable impact on organisational culture. Although positional power can be enforced through policies and procedures (Schein, 2009), personal power is believed to be a more effective tool in 'evolving the culture' and gaining buy-in from employees (Schein, 2009).

Research method
Research approach

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, which is considered useful for understanding the actions and motivations of individuals (Myers, 2013). The focus of the study was to understand the perceptions of leadership's ability to influence organisational culture.

Research philosophy

The study emphasises two key assumptions, namely, ontology and epistemology, which guided the exploration of mid-level managers' perceptions of leadership and organisational culture. The researcher also adhered to a subjectivist ontology, which posits that multiple realities exist because of individuals experiencing and perceiving their realities differently (Burrell & Morgan, 2016). The epistemology stance within interpretivism entails comprehending individuals' roles in the study (Saunders et al., 2019). It aims to generate comprehensive understanding of social worlds and contexts, employing qualitative approaches to explore mid-level leaders' perceptions of their influence on organisational culture in a cash management company.

Population and sampling

The population from which the sample was selected is the operations mid-level leadership team, comprising 37 leaders in one of three distinct roles: logistics manager, processing manager, or centre manager. The population is dispersed across the following regions delineated by the organisation: KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern and Western Cape, North East, Gauteng and Inland. Purposive sampling will be used, as participants were selected by virtue of their knowledge or experience (Bernard, 2002). The study comprised 12 participants, with 6 being black Africans, 5 white people and 1 coloured. Among the participants, 5 belonged to large branches, 5 to medium branches and 2 to small branches. In terms of business units, 6 were associated with the Processing unit, 5 with Logistics and 3 participants had connections with both units. Table 1 indicated the biographical profile of the participants.

Data collection methods

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data for the study. These interviews provided the researcher with the flexibility to gain insight and meet the objectives of the study (Galletta, 2012). The interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams and audio-recorded for later transcription (Saunders et al., 2019). Participants were invited via email and a convenient time was scheduled once consent was obtained. The researcher conducted the interviews and transcribed the recordings to become familiar with the data.

A total of 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide with 15 open-ended questions. The average interview lasted 37 min and 13 s, with a range of 20 min and 55 s to 54 min and 34 s. Questions focused on the participants' interaction with subordinates, contributions to the organisation's culture, the reflection of company values in employee behaviour and suggestions for improving culture.

Data analysis and interpretation

The six-step thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clark (2006) was used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is a systematic and logical approach to qualitative data analysis, where the researcher identifies recurring themes or

TABLE 1: Biographical profile of sample.

Participant	Race	Branch size	Business unit
Participant 1	Black African person	Large	Logistics
Participant 2	White person	Medium	Processing
Participant 3	Coloured person	Large	Processing
Participant 4	Black African person	Small	Processing and Logistics
Participant 5	Black African person	Medium	Processing and Logistics
Participant 6	White person	Large	Processing
Participant 7	White person	Large	Logistics
Participant 8	Black African person	Small	Processing and Logistics
Participant 9	Black African person	Medium	Logistics
Participant 10	White person	Medium	Processing
Participant 11	White person	Medium	Logistics
Participant 12	Black African person	Medium	Processing and Logistics

patterns within the data set through coding (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 651). Atlas.ti Version 22 was used for coding. The first step in thematic analysis was familiarisation with the data, which involved verifying the accuracy of transcripts against audio recordings and reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain familiarity with the content (Braun & Clark, 2006). The next step was to create initial codes, which were descriptive words or short phrases (King et al., 2019). The third step involved searching for themes by grouping descriptive codes with similar trends into interpretive codes and themes (King et al., 2019). The fourth step was reviewing the themes, which were relevant to the research topic and reflected participants' shared views, differences in opinion and individual accounts (King et al., 2019, pp. 200–201). The fifth step was defining each theme, which involved reviewing and clarifying the meaning of each theme as recommended by Terry et al. (2017).

Overarching themes were also identified at a higher level of abstraction, such as key theoretical concepts. The final step was writing up the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Strategies to ensure quality data and integrity

Quality data and integrity were maintained using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was ensured by accurately representing the participants' views through verbatim quotes (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Transferability was established by providing rich descriptions of the research setting, aims and methodology (Shenton, 2004) and the data (Bowen, 2005). Dependability was related to a logically traceable and clearly documented research process (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Confirmability was ensured by quoting participants' statements verbatim to support the findings. The researcher must ensure the quality of their research, meaning that the findings should withstand close scrutiny (Raimond, 1993, p. 55).

Ethical considerations

The study received ethical clearance from the Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management's research ethics committee (IPPM-2019-386 [M]). Participants were informed of the aim and objectives of the research prior to the interviews, and their informed consent was obtained. Participants were advised that they could withdraw from the interviews at any time without adverse consequences, and their consent to record the interviews was obtained before each interview. Participants were informed of how their information would be managed and stored, and how the results would be made available. Participants' anonymity was maintained, and no personal identifiers were used in the
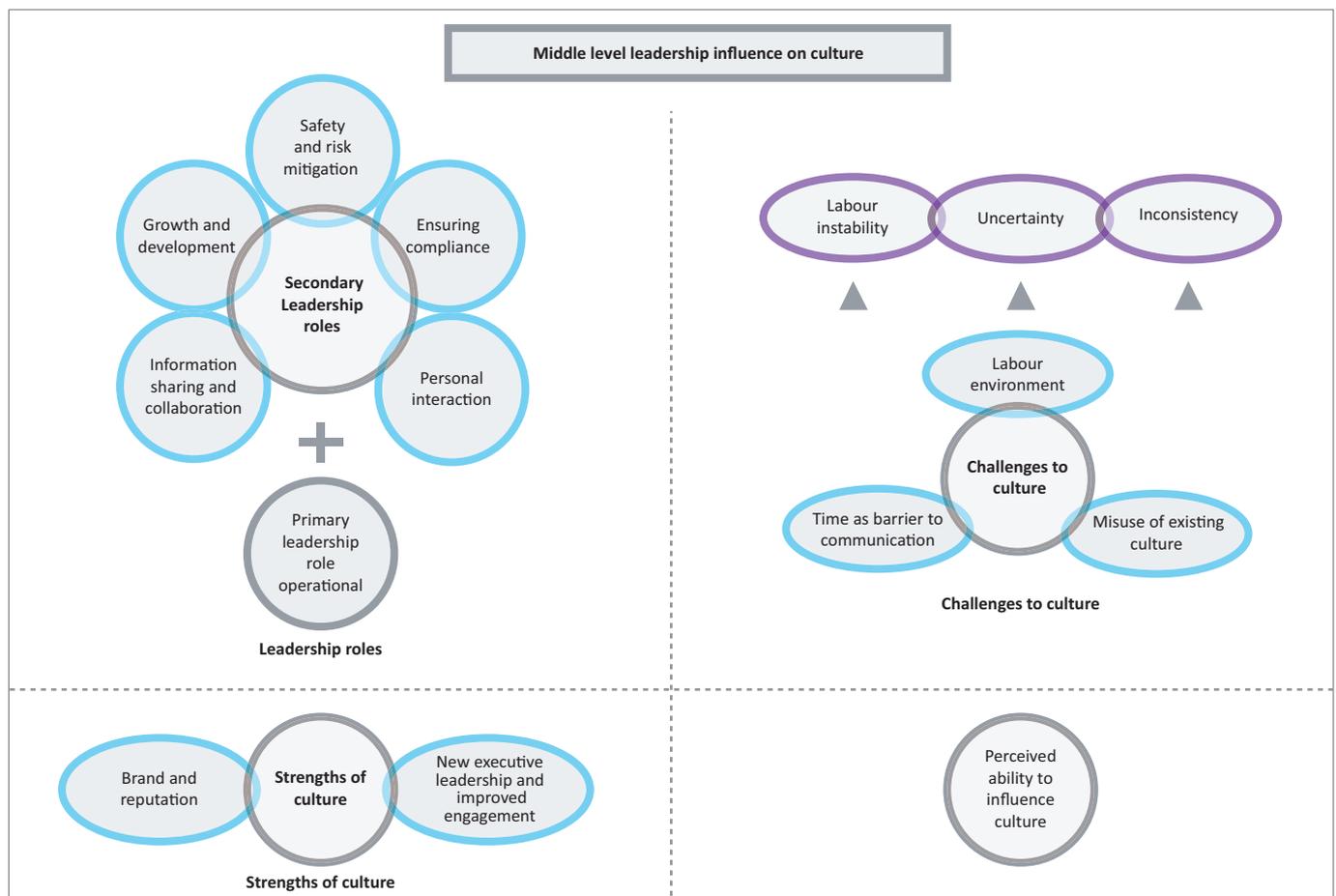

FIGURE 1: Thematic map with four themes.

reporting, with participant names replaced with pseudonyms and the organisation not named.

Findings

The primary objective of this study was to determine the influence of mid-level leadership on organisational culture in a cash management company. Through thematic analysis, four themes were developed with regard to the perceptions of leadership's ability to influence the culture of the organisation: Leadership roles, challenges to culture; strengths of culture and perceived ability to influence culture (see Figure 1). Figure 1 depicts several subthemes that were identified under leadership roles, challenges to culture and strengths of culture.

Theme 1: Leadership roles

Several questions were posed to the participants to gain an understanding of their leadership style. Leaders were asked to describe their day-to-day activities, degree of interaction with subordinates, frequency of engagements and perceived role within the organisation. The participants' descriptions of their daily activities provided a contextual background to their operational environment, which, together with the type of challenges experienced and key priorities for the day, demonstrated a trend in leadership roles. All participants exhibited a propensity for production- or task-orientated behaviours, with a moderate to strong degree of relationship- or employee-orientated behaviours (Blake & McCanse, 1991; Cameron & Quinn, 2011; Likert, 1967). One primary and five secondary leadership roles were identified.

Primary leadership role

Leaders across all business units focused primarily on the operations component or branch for which they were responsible for. Operational aspects included reviewing historical reports, operational planning, emphasising targets or goals, performance standards, meeting service-level agreements and customer expectations, addressing queries and assessing operational reports. For example, participant 9 indicated that they would 'do audits each and every day', participant 2 stated that they would 'rather focus in getting work done, that we get our service-level agreements to the banks', participant 4 had a similar response

> 'So, it is making sure that, from an operational perspective, you meet, sort of, the SLAs [*service-level agreements*] and, if you unable to, then you manage expectations and that sort of thing.' (participant 4, small branch size, processing and logistics unit)

Participant 1 indicated 'To make sure that the organisation succeeds or meets its targets and its goals'.

Secondary leadership roles

In addition to the operational aspects, the leaders also expressed their secondary leadership roles, which are: safety and risk mitigation, ensuring compliance, personal interaction, information sharing and collaboration and growth and development, as reflected in Figure 2 and discussed below.
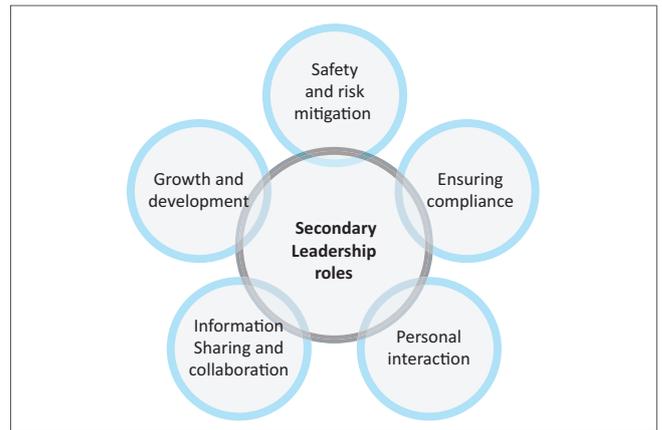

FIGURE 2: Secondary leadership roles.

Safety and risk mitigation

There are certain risks posed to organisations operating within the cash management industry of South Africa, such as CIT heists, which negatively impact logistics business units. Employees in the Processing unit deal with high volumes of cash, which poses the risk of theft. The majority of leaders mentioned risk as an element of their leadership role. For example, participant 2 stated that 'Mitigating risk is also a big part of my leadership that I must do'. Participant 7 referred to '… safety is the way we live every day. Risk management is obviously, it's not just about operations, but risk management as part of our daily tasks'. Participant 3 indicated

> 'At centre level, we do the execution, and then, from a risk perspective, the same. I need to ensure whatever we do, the controls are in place that they don't have losses and theft and so forth.' (participant 3, medium branch size, processing unit)

Ensuring compliance

Leaders articulated a need to ensure a level of compliance within their role. For example, participant 5 mentioned 'We need to adhere to company policies and procedures. We need to interpret the company and drive it as … if it's ours'. Many of the leaders described compliance as a means of achieving risk mitigation and safety requirements, with participant 2 stating; 'My work is also to make sure that procedures are followed'. Others expressed compliance as a means of achieving operational effectiveness or delivering customer service, for example participant 6 highlighted that 'We need to comply to certain rules' and participant 4 stating that 'We have to plan in accordance to the compliancy that we need to meet in our company'.

Personal interaction

All leaders expressed that their interaction with employees and subordinates comprised more than 50% of their time in a workday. However, the responses differed with regard to the type of discussions that were held. Many leaders stated that they have informal chats with employees daily, where work-related matters were discussed in a casual conversation. For example, participant 7 stated 'As they saddle up, [*I*] check with them in the vehicles, ask them how's things going, I call it up

cockpit sessions'. Participant 2 mentioned 'I just do a walk-through all the tellers, greeting everybody, checking a bit in on them'. More formal meetings were held on a weekly or monthly basis and involved operational-level discussions around the meeting of targets, customer service-level agreements, compliance, safety and risk mitigation. Participant 1 indicated

'If the team see you in that area deploying on the ground with them, you know, getting burned by the same sun that is burning them, getting frustrated by the public, that frustrates them. So they really appreciate that visibility.' (participant 1, large branch size, logistics unit)

Information-sharing and collaboration

Majority of the leaders expressed a propensity to share information in an effort to provide context and understanding of the operational environment in which employees were required to perform. Participant 8 mentioned:

'I give full information to the staff below me, and then I ensure that I make them understand what is the journey of the company… and why should we live that type of a culture.' (participant 8, small branch size, logistics and processing unit)

Participant 4 indicated:

"If it's not what you want to hear and if you're gonna get upset with me, get upset with me. But understand that, [at] the end of the day, I'm being completely transparent to you, and I'm telling it to you as it is. And I think staff appreciate that way. You don't sugar-coat certain things and try to make it much easier for them to digest. Sometimes, I think, when you speak the truth but break it down to their level of understanding, they do appreciate it.' (participant 4, small branch size, processing and logistics unit)

Leaders noted that their role was to take the information received from the support function or higher-level leaders and filter it down to employees to ensure the successful running of the operations by being transparent, collaborating and teamwork.

Growth and development

Some of the leaders expressed that they focused on promoting the development of employees. Examples that were mentioned included study assistance provided by the organisation, on-the-job learning and learning from one's mistakes through information-sharing and encouragement or by providing opportunities for the development and progression of individuals. For example, participant 4 mentioned:

'… as management, if we don't equip our staff with the necessary tools and equipment, it's senseless bringing up, like, a cultural aspect of the organisation and just automatically expecting your staff to achieve it when we are responsible for the training and development of them.' (participant 4, small branch size, processing and logistics unit)

Participant 5 stated:

'Seeing someone progressing in life and being somewhere, being something in understanding their purpose in life. It then puts me in a position to say, 'I think I am fulfilling the duties of being a

leader.' (participant 5, medium branch size, logistics and processing unit)

Theme 2: Challenges to culture

Theme 2 represents the challenges the leaders discussed. There were three sub-themes, which are outlined in Figure 3.

Labour environment

Three features of the labour environment were identified as having an influence on the culture within their areas of responsibility. The first feature was identified as labour instability, which was brought about by shop steward engagements and union affiliations. The second feature was uncertainty because of an unknown outcome of a bank tender. The third feature was identified as inconsistency and related to inconsistent messaging and employment contracts, which had created division among employees.

Labour instability

Leaders within the logistics business unit showed particular concern with regard to labour instability and the impact of shop stewards' engagements and union affiliations, which they believed impacted the operational environment and the culture. Interestingly, while they do not oversee the logistics business unit, leaders in the processing business also referred to the implications of shop stewards' actions and the labour instability experienced by their counterparts in logistics. Participant 1 mentioned how labour instability is unpredictable and can occur at any time:

'There's a lot of things that goes around in the organisation, things that can trigger industrial instability. My workday is one of the most interesting days in the organisation. It can start with a minor complaint and can end with a possible work stoppage.' (participant 1, large branch size, logistics unit)

Uncertainty

Leaders in the processing unit expressed concerns around the renewal of a certain bank tender and the implications presented by an uncertainty of the outcome, which had
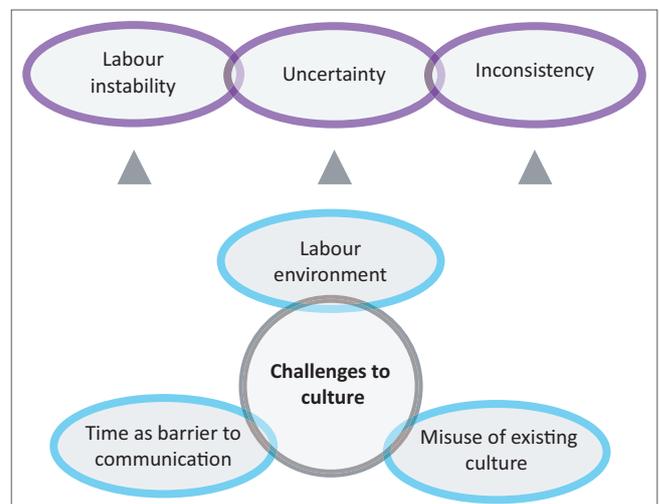

FIGURE 3: Challenges to culture.

impacted employee morale because of a possible reduction in volumes. A reduction in volumes would signal a reduced workload, and employees were concerned about job security. Participant 10 stated:

'I think it [*culture*] is good. It's just that, these days, with the [*bank*] RFP…, it [*the culture*] maybe went a bit down. I think that, definitely, morale is impacting. They [*employees*] feel good about the company. It's just now, with the [*bank*] RFP, they are quite a bit stressed out: 'What's is going to happen?', the way forward, and so on.' (participant 10, medium branch size, processing unit)

Inconsistency

Leaders in the logistics and processing business units expressed concern about an inconsistency in messages and employment contracts that impacted leaders' ability to maintain the culture within their areas of responsibility. Participant 1 stated:

'If there is no consistency in the application of some of the things related to culture, … that might have a negative influence in you contributing positively. If the message is not the same, or if the message can change at any time. So, that might be the only thing that might kill the culture, the positive culture drive in our organisation — if there is no consistency in what we say.' (participant 1, large branch size, logistics unit)

Participant 3 referred to different terms of employment being applied to employees within the same job role:

'The different contracts that we have in the system, I think that is also creating unnecessary unfairness in the system, because you're doing the same work, but you don't get equal pay. We're doing the same work, but you're getting the different outcome in terms of a teller, and I think it's also creating unnecessary conflict in the system.' (participant 3, medium branch size, processing unit)

Misuse of existing culture

Another challenge to the organisation's culture was identified as a misuse or misinterpretation of the organisation's 'people first' culture. The tenet of 'people first' was introduced more than 5 years ago and was believed to have positively impacted the culture. The leaders noted that, while the misinterpretation was applied across the organisation, it was of particular concern in Logistics, where the shop stewards and employees abused the notion of the importance of people. For example, participant 1 stated

'I think the biggest problem that I'm having … is the mindset of some of the people and the misinterpretation of what does 'people first' mean.' Participant 9 indicated that

'Most of the people, I think they're confusing the concept of 'people first' with discipline and standards. Then they want to demand more. "It's giving us leverage to demand more salary to the employer. Giving us leverage to misbehave and the employer will not say, and will not do this to me, because they are doing "people first'. I think their interpretation of it is not correct.' (participant 9, medium branch size, logistics unit)

Time as a barrier to communication

Leaders noted the importance of communicating with employees in collective settings and in one-on-one

engagements leaders articulated the operational constraints that impacted their ability to allocate time to communicate and engage with employees. For example, participant 2 stated:

'The guys get busy on the floor, and even if we decide, 'this is how we are going to start communicating this', and then we go into backlog, and then they leave this, because the work must get priority.' (participant 2, medium branch size, processing unit)

For example, participant 3 stated,

'[*M*]aybe [*we*] have to free up the managers from meetings and stuff like that, that we can spend more time talking to the people and just engaging. Some of the staff just want us to talk to them. They don't want Support Office. They just want managers to talk to the staff.' (participant 3, large branch size, logistics unit)

Another participant mentioned,

'I'd like to have more time, but, based on where we are right now, as our organisation, to start having these one-on-one conversations with the staff, yes, we do try to get through them, but I think the amount of workload that we currently have, overseeing three departments, the labour instability, we don't necessarily make enough time.'

Theme 3: Strengths of culture

The sub-themes listed in Figure 4 were identified as the strengths of the existing culture of the organisation.

New executive leadership and improved engagement

Leaders expressed their appreciation of the new executive leadership, in particular the Group CEO and the Chief Operations Officer (COO), who they believed added value through engagement and transparency. The leaders also believed the COO to be hands-on and relatable to all levels of employees. For example, participant 7 stated:

'We have more of this video clips coming out from people like [*Group CEO*] and [*COO*] … It's a winner. I think the generations have changed. It makes one big difference.'

Participant 6 also referred to the COO; '[*Name of COO*] interacts on a higher level, but is hands-on … interaction with any level of person'.

The Group CEO's monthly engagement sessions provided the leaders with clear insights that they were able to communicate to their subordinates. Participant 7 stated:

'Our leadership on top, they are doing something about the business, they have strategic sessions. I mean, with [*Group CEO*]
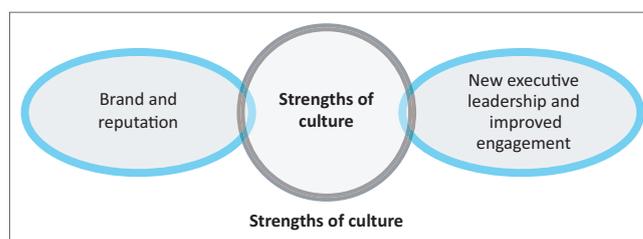
FIGURE 4: Strengths of culture.

[*name of meeting*]-type high talk that he is having. … So there is always that information they share with us. It empowers us…'. (Participant 7, large business branch, logistics unit)

Brand reputation

The leaders noted that the organisation had a positive brand image among the public and competitors and specifically mentioned that risk aversion contributed to the organisation's brand. They noted that the organisation's image is one of a leader in the industry, because of a low CIT incidence rate and investments in safety. For example, participant 1 stated:

'… when you look on social media, when every time something goes down, and there's [*company*] involved, and [*company*] comes out tops… When we look at the comments that goes there, it just tells you that [*company*], it's something else.' (participant 1, large branch size, logistics unit)

Participant 3 stated that 'The competitors also have that respect for [*company*]. If you look … in terms of robberies and so forth, and in terms of our losses, we leading'.

Theme 4: Perceived ability to influence culture

Most of the mid-level leaders highlighted the role of executives in setting the tone and providing guidance for the culture but they believed that they brought about the execution thereof. The mid-level leaders indicated they were more visible and more accessible than the executives, thus having more impact. For example, participant 3 stated

'So, certain decisions, yes, what executives make, do have an impact. For example, they go upfront and do negotiations and decide what increases will be. I think that is also setting the tone in the centres. I think that is important. But the manager in the centre, that's the person. driving the culture and getting the message across in terms of what Support Office wants us to do from objective perspective. I think because we are dealing with the masses on ground level.' (participant 3, large branch size, logistics unit)

Participant also 7 mentioned that

'I am limited to this specific area. So it's the senior person that is involved on national, or even regional [*level*] has much more impact than I would have. They effect on the entire organisation.'

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to explore how the mid-level leaders of the organisation perceive their ability to influence the culture of the organisation. A total of 12 participants were interviewed, and four themes emerged from the data, namely leadership roles, challenges to the culture, strengths of the culture and perceived ability to influence culture.

Theme 1: Leadership roless

Theme 1 addressed the objective of determining the perceived role of leadership. The findings identified one primary and five secondary leadership roles that exist among the mid-level leaders of the organisation. The primary leadership role is an operational role, where the focus of leaders is to ensure the day-to-day operational running of their branch or department. The views expressed by participants regarding their day-to-day activities indicate task-orientated behaviours, which are characterised by stability and an internal focus to achieve specific objectives and goals (Cameron & Quinn, 2006; Judge et al., 2004; Tran, 2020). Leaders focus on accomplishing goals by emphasising targets as predetermined objectives (Muenjohn et al., 2018), in this case, prioritising the achievement of customer service-level agreements, aiming to be the best centre in the country, reducing costs and ensuring financial stability. The goal-orientated and customer-centric operational roles articulated by leaders relate to the 'Order' organisational style of Groysberg et al. (2018, p. 48), where respect, structure and shared norms provide a well-planned and well-organised environment in which employees 'play by the rules'.

The five secondary leadership roles that were identified were: safety and risk mitigation, ensuring compliance, personal interaction, information-sharing and collaboration and growth and development.

Safety and risk mitigation

Leaders must contend with both their internal and external environments, and their leadership styles must be adjusted to deal with the issues presented (Nohria, 2022; Trans, 2020), resulting in an evolving role of a leader (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016). The day-to-day behaviour and co-ordinated action regarding safety and risk mitigation priorities demonstrate a consensus that certain regularities maintain a form of stability for the organisation and its people (cf. Schein, 2017).

Ensuring compliance

The need to maintain and control order through compliance is associated with an autocratic style of leadership, with leaders prone to having a task-orientated relationship with their followers (Tran, 2020; Meunjohn et al., 2018). Taking into consideration the nature of the organisation's operational environment, ensuring compliance is necessary in the high- risk environment of a cash management company. Additionally, an adherence to certain rules and policies provides a basis from which leaders can garner the strength of co-operation (Groysberg et al., 2018) to enhance the overall performance of the organisation (Schein, 2017).

Personal interaction

Leaders' personal engagement with and concern for their employees signifies their ability to influence through interpersonal communication (Gigliotti & Rubin, 2017; Northouse, 2020; Tannenbaum et al., 1961). Having one-on-one engagements with employees and regular personal interaction could build emotional bonds with employees that ultimately promote the effectiveness of a leader (Goldman, 2000). Increased employee engagement reinforces

the relationship between leaders and their followers and is associated with a charismatic leadership style (Gangai & Agrawal, 2017). Additionally, a high level of engagement also drives employee commitment, directly impacting an organisation's productivity and performance (Tran, 2020).

Information sharing and collaboration

The sharing of information and a tendency to collaborate among the leaders are characteristics of a democratic style of leadership where a sense of fairness is achieved through a peer-to-peer style of communication that promotes employees' autonomy (Northouse, 2020). The degree of transparency implied by leaders emphasised that value was placed on employees being able to understand, interpret and extract meaning from the information relayed. Leaders expressed a need to generate awareness among employees which Greeshma (2020) suggests as a means of ensuring an alignment of employees to the organisation's purpose and mission.

Growth and development

The elements expressed by leaders to promote the growth and development of employees reflect a servant leadership style, as there is a sense of employee empowerment reflected in the leaders' descriptions. Developing people for future responsibilities enhances leadership effectiveness (Goldman, 2000). Such leaders view their role as enablers of employee progress (Muenjohn et al., 2018), and they take an interest in assisting employees to develop their capabilities (Northouse, 2020).

Theme 2: Challenges to cultures

Theme 2 addressed the secondary objective of determining the challenges to the organisation's culture. The study revealed three challenges experienced by leaders in this regard: labour instability, uncertainty and inconsistency; misuse of the existing culture and a lack of time as a barrier to communication.

Labour instability

Culture, in itself, is referred to as a stabilising force that provides 'structural stability' to an organisation (Schein, 2017, p. 10); however, employees affiliated to a specific union primarily interact with each other, resulting in the occurrence of a subculture (Schein, 2017). Unfortunately, the subculture may hold differing cultural assumptions, influenced by outside constituencies (Schein, 2017). In the case of the organisation under study, this had manifested in a cultural divide, which presented a form of instability.

Uncertainty

Strongly embedded beliefs and values could guide employees through uncertain, uncontrolled, or difficult events (Schein, 2017). However, within the organisation under study, the uncertainty and threat posed by a reduction in volumes had negatively impacted employee morale. The reaction towards

the uncertainty demonstrates the value employees place on stability and control (Groysberg et al., 2018). Maintaining stability as a cultural dimension (Groysberg et al., 2018) requires flexibility and an openness to change (Cameron & Quinn, 2006, 2011). Leaders must actively engage employees to improve morale (Hidayah et al., 2019) and the issues surrounding the uncertainty must be addressed, together with proposed solutions to the challenges.

Inconsistency

Leaders are responsible for providing communication that allows employees to interpret their environment (Overall & McNulty, 2017; Schein, 2017). Unfortunately, leaders within the organisation under study faced the challenge of conflicting messages that were not always within their control and stemmed from changes in the environment. The inconsistent messaging and dissimilar employee contracts created a misalignment among employees. Conflicting messaging can weaken an organisation's culture (Hall & Yip, 2016), as it creates confusion and conflict (Flamholtz & Randle, 2014). The source of the conflicting messaging must be understood, and the reasoning for it determined, in order to address and prevent any further negative effects.

Misuse of existing culture

Embedded cultural elements provide historical benefits to employees and organisations (Robbins & Judge, 2016). The 'people first' culture of the organisation had been maintained for some time and had embedded in the minds of the employees of the organisation under study. Considered the collective 'programming of the mind', culture influences behaviour and the explanations provided for certain behaviours (Schein, 2010, p. 327). Joseph and Kibera (2019) refer to values and assumptions that are used to explain certain behaviour and build a mental framework for reasoning as employees respond to stimuli within their environment. Employees using the culture as leverage suggest that they used the axiom of 'people first' to justify and explain self-serving behaviours. Shared assumptions can, over time, lead to misperceptions that are at odds with reality (Schein, 2010). These misperceptions could be the consequence of unexplained artefacts, which is the most visible level of culture and is depicted in the material used to personify an organisation's culture (Schein, 2017).

Time as a barrier to communication

As leaders take on greater responsibilities, the reality is that the management of systems and processes displaces the management of people (Schein, 2009). The leaders noted that engagements with employees were interrupted by operational issues, which have to take precedence. Communication is pivotal to maintaining good leader–employee relationships, which contribute to employee productivity and internal satisfaction (Tran, 2020). The leaders in the organisation under study grasped the importance of engagement and communication and sought to influence through interpersonal relationships. They also understood the value of informal

messaging, which proved to be a robust coaching and teaching mechanism (Schein, 2004). However, the leaders noted that, unfortunately, the situational environment and operational requirements restricted their ability to allocate time to engage in meaningful conversation with their employees. Communicating clearly and effectively enhances efficiency and fosters a harmonious environment (Manoharan & Singal, 2019).

Theme 3: Strengths of cultures

Theme 3 addressed the research objective to determine the organisation's culture strengths. Two strengths were identified, namely the new executive leadership and the resultant improved engagement and brand reputation.

New executive leadership and improved engagement

The executive leaders who had joined the organisation seemed to understand the value created through visible behaviour. Schein (2017) suggests that visible behaviour promotes the communication of assumptions and values to other group members (Schein, 2017). Senior executives who reach out to front-line employees and forge connections with people at all levels of the organisation are better able to address issues early and seize opportunities ahead of their competitors (Nohria, 2022; Nohria et al., 2003). The mid-level leaders under study appreciated the enhanced transparency, as it enhanced their communication with front-line employees. The executive leaders not only drafted the strategy but also ensured that the strategy was communicated to the leaders within the organisation. They remained visible and accessible to all leaders. By practising this level of engagement, executive leaders encouraged mid-level leaders to connect with people at all levels, thereby contributing to internal satisfaction and improved productivity (Tran, 2020). Frequent engagement sessions and enhanced visibility allow executive leaders to understand the business's culture dynamics (Groysberg et al., 2018).

Brand reputation

A strong and distinct organisational culture can be linked to a strong and distinct organisational brand (Yohn, 2017). The organisation under study had built a reputation of safety and trustworthiness in the industry and had differentiated itself from competitors. This suggests that the culture and brand were driven by the same purpose and values (Yohn, 2017). The culture shared by most employees also determines how the organisation relates to its external environment (Morgan & Vorhies, 2018). In the current study, the employees seemed to possess an understanding of how value is created for its customers and appeared to have embraced those enhancements.

Perceived ability to influence culture

The role of mid-level leaders has become more important than ever. They are considered 'connecting leaders', as they are in a position to reduce the distance between the executive-level leaders and frontline employees (Jaser, 2021). The mid-

level leaders in the current study understood their significance in influencing and having the greater impact on the organisation's culture and their responsibility to front-line employees. The leaders emphasised that their role was not only to relay the information received from executives but to also ensure that employees understood the meaning. In this way, they play the role of a 'broker' who communicates both ways to enhance transparency (Jaser, 2021, p. 1).

An emphasis on 'integration, managing relationships and coordinating a group effort' signifies independent 'people interactions', as opposed to individual action and competition (Groysberg et al., 2018, p. 47). The organisation therefore encourages a collaborative culture, which enhances the success of a group (Jaser, 2021; Groysberg et al., 2018).

Practical implications

In this study, the organisations's leaders encounter labour instability, uncertainty and inconsistency. It is crucial for human resource (HR) professionals to grasp the global context in which organisations function and become strategic partners in delivering tangible value (Ulrich et al., 2012; Ulrich, 2020). This value can be achieved through well-defined goals and objectives that align with the organisation's strategy, benefiting employees, leaders and the organisation while considering the organisational environment (Daft, 2018; Northouse, 2020).

The organisation's culture is considered a significant predictor of future success; thus, HR professionals play a vital role in ensuring that leaders possess the capabilities that align with and contribute to the effectiveness of the organisational culture (Ulrich, 2020; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). Effective leaders can foster a favourable culture, leading to increased employee satisfaction, retention, motivation and successful strategic outcomes (Shaw & Newton, 2014; Yang, 2014). To accomplish this, HR professionals should regularly conduct culture audits to gauge the alignment of these capabilities
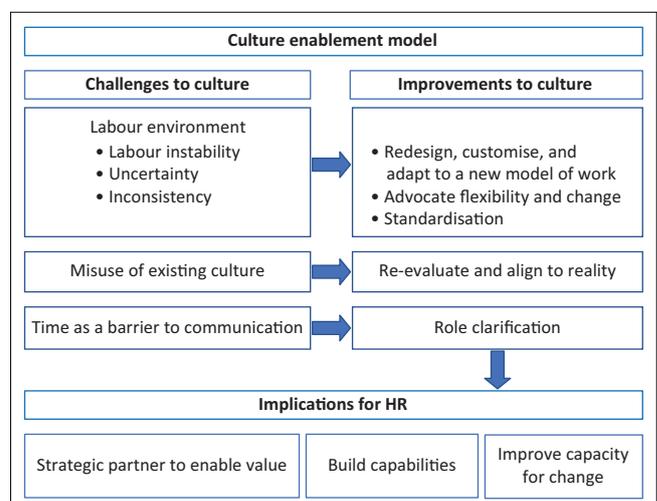
HR, human resource.

FIGURE 5: Culture enablement model.

with the organisation's cultural aspirations (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Ulrich, 2020). Additionally, they must examine management practices and leadership roles to ensure they support the desired culture (Katzenbach et al., 2016). A model to address the challenges faced by the mid-level leaders is presented in Figure 5 and discussed below.

The study highlights the challenges faced by mid-level leaders in influencing organisational culture and the need to support and empower them in their role.

The importance of mid-level leaders in organisations is gaining recognition (Jaser, 2021). They serve as a link between executives and front-line employees, and their role in fostering a desired cultural outcome is crucial (Jaser, 2021). The existence of conflicting dominant leadership roles can either impede or support an organisation's cultural objectives. An operational role, for example, reflects stability and internal focus, while organisations also require a degree of flexibility for innovation and change (Cameron & Quinn, 2006, 2011; Groysberg et al., 2018; Tran, 2020). The findings and conceptual model provide a valuable addition to the research on leadership and organisational culture.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The limitations of this study should be considered when interpreting its findings. The study was limited to the cash management in South Africa and this may limit the generalisability of the findings to other organisations or industries. Hence, the findings must be interpreted with caution. The study focused solely on the perceptions of mid-level leaders, and other perspectives from employees at different levels or external stakeholders were not included, potentially limiting the comprehensiveness of the insights. The study captured the perceptions of participants through qualitative interviews, and future research could establish relationships between leadership styles and organisational culture through quantitative research. Future research should consider the implications senior leadership and its implication on organisational culture and be conducted with a larger sample. To address the limitations and extend the understanding of mid-level leadership and organisational culture in the cash management industry, future research should consider a larger and more diverse sample of organisations and participants. A mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative insights from interviews with quantitative data from surveys could provide a more comprehensive view. Additionally, investigating the perspectives of employees at various levels and external stakeholders, such as clients and suppliers, would offer a holistic understanding of organisational culture and its impact. Longitudinal studies could also be valuable to track changes in organisational culture over time and assess the long-term effects of mid-level leaders' actions. These recommendations would be a valuable avenue for future research.

Conclusion

Within an evolving organisational landscape where competitive advantage is considered a key differentiator, culture is believed to be an important tool in setting organisations apart (Groysberg et al., 2018; Schein, 2010; Yohn, 2017). It is widely recognised that leaders play a vital role in driving cultural change within an organisation (Amabile, 1998; Schein, 2017; Tran, 2020), and the aim of the present study was to determine if the leaders were aware of their influence on organisational culture, and if they perceived their influence to make a difference within the organisation.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

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