



Span-of-control's role at the intersection of transactional leadership and employee commitment

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Orientation: South African state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are overburdened by excessive top-level management, straining human capital budgets. Reducing this may increase the span of control, affecting the relationship between leadership style and employee commitment.

Research purpose: This study examines the role of span of control in the relationship between the transactional leadership behaviours of Black top managers and employee commitment in South African SOEs.

Motivation for the study: Aligning leadership behaviours with employee expectations is crucial for fostering commitment and retaining talent, especially in South African SOEs facing performance issues.

Research design, approach and method: A positivist approach and quantitative method were employed. Data were gathered through self-administered questionnaires from a purposive sample of employees of SOEs. The study's constructs were assessed using validated instruments, including the multifactor leadership scale and the three-component employee commitment model. Descriptive and inferential statistical tools were employed for data analysis.

Main findings: The study reveals that span of control does not moderate the relationship between contingent reward behaviour or management by exception (Passive) and employee commitment. However, span of control moderates the relationship between management by exception (Active) and affective commitment, but not with normative commitment or continuance commitment.

Practical/Managerial implication: The findings highlight specific leadership behaviours that can enhance employee commitment in South African SOEs with increased span of control.

Contribution/value-add: This study contributes to leadership theory by identifying how span of control influences the relationship between leadership behaviour and employee commitment in South African SOEs.

Keywords: transactional leadership; black managers; employee commitment; span of control; state-owned enterprises.

Introduction

Despite the enactment of the *Employment Equity Act (EEA) in 1998*, South African citizens that are Blacks remain under-represented at the higher echelons of organisations as they occupy a paltry 34% of top management positions (Commission for Employment Equity Report 2024) even though demographically, they make up 91% of the country's population (Statistics South Africa 2022). In the quest to meet a target of at least 50% Black representation by 2024, the government resolved to endorse changes in its Employment Equity regulations to further push for more Blacks at senior management level across South African organisations. This is even more so for state-owned enterprises (SOEs) that are partially or fully owned by the government and have been established to undertake commercial activities but notably, most seem to be underperforming. Perhaps, owing to the control that the government has over the SOEs, the current percentage of Blacks in top management positions in these SOEs has risen to 83.2% (Commission for Employment Equity Annual Report 2024), indicating that these organisations have made progress with respect to the aims of the EEA by advancing Blacks to these positions. However, these advancements can only benefit organisations if those appointed demonstrate effective leadership qualities that empower, nurture and develop employees, thereby improving employee commitment and

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enhancing business performance (Donkor, Dongmei & Sekyere 2021; James & Desormeaux 2023; Robinson, Thomas & Tarver 2023).

According to Mbo and Adjasi (2017), most SOEs are affected by inadequate governance structures as well as an imbalance of the commercial, developmental and shareholder demands placed on them. This notwithstanding, leadership ultimately remains responsible for organisational performance and this is what makes it justifiable to interrogate the appropriateness of the leadership in SOEs (Sedarmayanti et al. 2020; Shrivastava, Shrivastava & Verma 2020; Sithomola 2019).

Leadership theory has progressively evolved to the point where its efficacy is determined by the extent to which a specific leadership style is suited to the environment in which it is applied (Hallo et al. 2020; Lundmark et al. 2020). As a result, a leadership style cannot be considered ineffectual unless it does not influence those for whom it is intended. This school of thought implies that leaders should constantly be on the lookout for contextual factors that may affect the relevance and efficacy of their leadership behaviours. It is partly for this reason that this study seeks to determine if span of control (SoC) moderates the relationship between the transactional leadership styles of Black top managers and the commitment of employees in SOEs in South Africa.

While the relationship between transactional leadership and employee commitment has been studied, the intervening roles of other factors in such relationships remain largely unexplored particularly in the context of developing economies. Perhaps concerned by this, Wanjala, Njoroge and Mathews (2017) proposed this as a potential area of interest for future research after discovering that transactional leadership behaviours have a significant impact on organisational commitment, and that employee participation has no moderating effect on the relationship between transactional leadership style and dimensions of organisational commitment.

Literature review

Transactional leadership

This study relies on the full range leadership model developed by Bass and Stogdill (1990) that acknowledges three forms of leadership styles – transformational, laissez faire and transactional. However, it specifically focusses on the transactional leadership style to investigate how its relationship with employee commitment is affected by SoC. This focus is driven by empirical studies conducted by Eresia-Eke and Mabasa (2018) as well as Mitchell (2019), which demonstrated that the transactional leadership style is predominantly employed by Black top managers in South African SOEs.

In an organisational context, the transactional leadership style manifests as a process of social exchange between

leaders and followers in which each party gains something of value (Dong 2023). Contributing to the discourse, Nurlina (2022) asserts that transactional leaders favour the utilisation of rewards to motivate subordinates. Transactional leadership style presents behaviours such as Contingent Reward (CR), Management by Exception (Active) (MBE_A) and Management by Exception (Passive) (MBE_P) (Aljumah 2023). Contingent Reward is demonstrated in leaders who depend on the mechanism of sharing targets and incentives by ensuring that employees are clear about what is required of them and the reward for accomplishing these goals (Saad & Abbas 2019). Leaders who display MBE_A behaviour constantly monitor the performance of the employees to manage deviations whereas those who display MBE_P allow employees to work independently and only intervene in the event of a serious problem that needs to be escalated in seam of a resolution (Crews, Brouwers & Visagie 2019). All these behaviours involve a reciprocal exchange where both parties benefit. This study views transactional leadership as the ability to provide valuable incentives to employees, encouraging them to contribute towards achieving of organisational goals.

Employee commitment

Employee commitment to the organisation is a state of mind that distinguishes between the willingness of workers to stay with an organisation and their desire to quit (Al Zeer, Alkhatib & Alshrouf 2019; Potgieter, Ferreira & Coetzee 2019). Allen and Meyer's (1990) model splits employee commitment into three components: affective, continuance, and normative commitment (Meyer Morin & Vandenberghe 2015). Affective commitment refers to the employee's emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in the organisation (Machokoto 2019). Employees may therefore be emotionally attached to the organisation because of identification with organisational values, goals and practices.

Continuance commitment emanates from costs associated with leaving the organisation while normative commitment stems from the employee's feeling of obligation to remain in the organisation (Indradevi & Veronica 2019). In terms of continuance commitment, employees may be dedicated to the organisation because of a lack of attractive alternative opportunities outside an organisation. Normative commitment emerges when people internalise the organisation's norms through socialisation and obtain benefits that compel them to reciprocate and/or accept the terms of a psychological contract (Harini, Rosyidi & Karnati 2019; Khan et al. 2021).

Gbadamosi, Ndaba and Oni (2007) argue that employees' commitment to organisational goals is largely motivated by the opportunity these goals provide to fulfil their individual aspirations. As such, there is a consistent element in the kaleidoscope of employee commitment perspectives that relates to an exchange process, which arises from a psychological contract between the employee and an organisation. Markedly, some factors have been identified as

influencing employee commitment, including personal characteristics, organisational structure, length of service, rewards, training, position level and leadership style (Berberoglu 2018; Mwesigwa, Tusiime & Ssekiziyivu 2020; Wydyanto & Yandi 2020). Among these factors, leadership style has courted the most attention from scholars (Harb, Hachem & Hamdan 2020; Lucjan et al. 2023; Thanh & Quang 2022) and this underscores its importance in shaping employee commitment.

Span of control

The SoC is the number of employees who report directly to a manager, and this varies depending on the bureaucratic level of authority of a manager (Clardy 2021). Typically, managers at higher levels of authority would have fewer employees reporting directly to them. However, when companies encounter conflicting goals, they are inclined to restructure their organisations and this affects the SoC as it often results in the removal of managerial layers (He & Liu 2019). Because of financial constraints and the existing high cost of human capital, South African SOEs have minimised their hiring (Sachs, Ewinyu & Shedi 2023), which may necessitate the compression of levels and therefore leading to an increase in the number of employees that report to a manager. The elimination of managerial layers results in a flattening of the organisation's structure and an increase in top managers' scope of influence, which may lead to an impasse owing to a non-linear increase in workload with each individual reporting directly to them (Reitzig 2022).

While Reitzig (2022) opines that flat structures can beat traditional hierarchies when the organisational goal is to become more creative, speedier or attractive to human talent, Kraichy and Schmidt (2020) suggest that leaner SoC tend to decrease job demands and therefore lead to a more engaged workforce. Conversely, Thompson, Buch and Glasø's study (2019) of SoC in the municipality context in Norway suggests that a broader SoC creates distance between leaders and followers, and this can affect the types of leader behaviours that may emerge and their efficacy.

Relationship between transactional leadership, employee commitment and span of control

Studies conducted in the public sector (Mahfouz 2019; Puni, Hilton & Quao 2021) that have utilised the multifactor leadership instrument, established that there is relationship between transactional leadership style and employee commitment. In their study, Sahraee and Abdullah (2018) revealed that transactional leadership style has a strong beneficial effect on affective commitment. More broadly, Wanjala, Njoroge and Bulitia (2017) found that there is a relationship between transactional leadership and all types of organisational commitment. Against the backdrop of the established relationship between transactional leadership and commitment, Zoller and Muldoon (2020) posited that research on SoC is needed, as failing to recognise its impact in the changing environment may lead to confusion and

frustration for leadership and employees. This is imperative because as the SoC broadens, employees face challenges related to the visibility and the role of the leader (Holm-Petersen, Østergaard & Andersen 2017; Jensen et al. 2023). In contributing to the discourse, El-Khalil and El-Kassar (2016) opine that a change in the SoC can potentially impact leadership effectiveness. The implication of this assertion may be that the effectiveness of the Black top manager may therefore be dependent on how well they adapt their leadership styles to the changing SoC.

Moon and Park (2019) declare that SoC is crucial in determining leadership accessibility, and this buttresses its impact on leadership style efficacy. This position is corroborated by the findings of studies conducted by Cheon (2022) as well as Hensellek, Kleine-Stegemann and Kollmann (2023) that illustrated some form of subliminal association between SoC and performance in quasi-governmental organisations and entrepreneurial ventures, respectively. Cognisant of these findings and yet keen to contribute to the body of knowledge, this current study considers the constructs of transactional leadership and employee commitment individually to identify behaviours that are most effective as contingent upon the existing SoC.

The nexus of span of control, contingent reward and employee commitment

Gumusluoglu, Karakitapoğlu-Aygün and Hirst (2013) argue that irrespective of whether or not leaders possess a preferred leadership style, the SoC may interfere with their ability to maintain a high quality of leader-follower exchange relationship with their employees. Moon and Park (2019) state that while employees are more likely to remain in their organisations when working closely with managers who exhibit transactional leadership, they also contend that transactional leaders with a broad SoC are likely to encounter more difficulties than those with a narrow SoC. This is because the distant leader-follower interpersonal relationship, characterised by a broad SoC, makes it difficult for transactional leaders to be keen on employing the CR behaviour (Chun et al. 2009). Contrarily, transactional leaders with a narrow SoC are better able to establish an efficient exchange of reward for effort and to monitor the performance of their followers, which could lead to greater trust between the employees and their organisations (Howell & Hall-Merenda 1999). It is against this background that this study therefore hypothesised that:

H_{1,1}: Span of control moderates the relationship between the contingent reward behaviour (as a facet of the transactional leadership style) of Black top managers and the affective commitment of their subordinates.

H_{1,2}: Span of control moderates the relationship between the contingent reward behaviour (as a facet of the transactional leadership style) of Black top managers and the normative commitment of their subordinates.

H_{1,3}: Span of control moderates the relationship between the contingent reward behaviour (as a facet of the transactional leadership style) of Black top managers and the continuance commitment of their subordinates.

The nexus of span of control, management by exception-active and employee commitment

Leaders who enact the MBE_A behaviour as a facet of the transactional leadership style allow policies and procedures to be followed without interfering; but if any abnormalities occur, they take corrective action (Gurbuz & Gulec 2022; Hancock et al. 2023). In order to ensure efficient execution of duties, the leader takes the initiative to monitor the conduct of the employees and promptly address any issues or mistakes (Cui, Lim & Song 2022). Given the narrower SoC that allows management to closely monitor employees, it appears conceivable that in such a setting, MBE_A behaviour may emerge more naturally than in a wider SoC, thereby enhancing the commitment levels of employees. It is for this reason that the study has hypothesised that:

$H_{2,1}$: Span of control moderates the relationship between the Management by Exception (Active) behaviour (as a facet of the transactional leadership style) of Black top managers and the affective commitment of their subordinates.

$H_{2,2}$: Span of control moderates the relationship between the Management by Exception (Active) behaviour (as a facet of the transactional leadership style) of Black top managers and the normative commitment of their subordinates.

$H_{2,3}$: Span of control moderates the relationship between the Management by Exception (Active) behaviour (as a facet of the transactional leadership style) of Black top managers and the continuance commitment of their subordinates.

The nexus of span of control, management by exception-passive and employee commitment

Management by Exception (Passive) behaviour is more likely to emerge when leaders are given a broader SoC, making it difficult to monitor mistakes and maintain overall control (Breevaart et al. 2014). Thompson et al. (2019) argue that when managing a large SoC, leaders should make it easier for employees to practise self-leadership by giving them more responsibility and authority, as well as encouraging them to set their own goals, quality-assure their own work, be critical and learn from their own mistakes. It is conceivable that by doing so, leaders and followers may feel more autonomous and competent, allowing them to handle a wider range of supervision. However, Thompson et al. (2019) opine that a large SoC creates a barrier between leaders and followers, restricting leaders' capacity to influence employees. Reitzig (2022) further states that with the MBE_P behaviour, managers relinquish decision-making power by delegating more work to their direct subordinates. It is therefore questionable whether the nature of the relationship between the leader and the employee where the leader is displaying the MBE_P behaviour may be impacted by any change in the SoC. This notwithstanding, the study hypothesises that:

$H_{3,1}$: Span of control moderates the relationship between the Management by Exception (Passive) behaviour (as a facet of the transactional leadership style) of black top managers and the affective commitment of their subordinates.

$H_{3,2}$: Span of control moderates the relationship between the Management by Exception (Passive) behaviour (as a facet of the transactional leadership style) of black top managers and the normative commitment of their subordinates.

$H_{3,3}$: Span of control moderates the relationship between the Management by Exception (Passive) behaviour (as a facet of the transactional leadership style) of black top managers and the continuance commitment of their subordinates.

The conceptual model as depicted in Figure 1, reflects the study's hypotheses that suggest that SoC plays a moderating in the relationship between transactional leadership behaviours and levels of employee commitment.

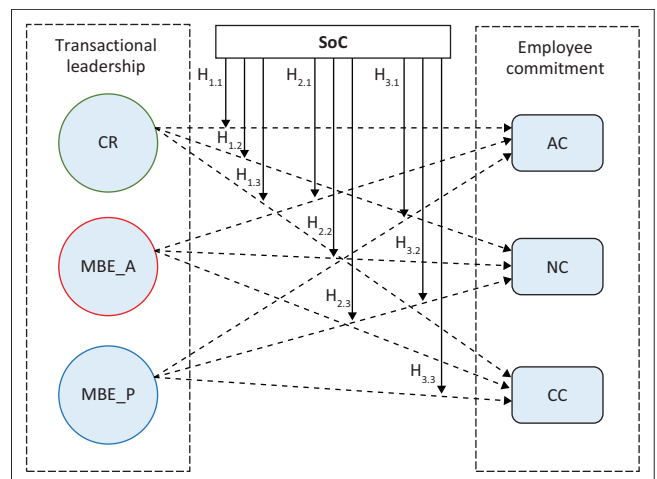
Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was granted by the University of Pretoria Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee on 11 March 2014 based on the written permission received from the organisations that participated in the study.

Research methodology

This research has been undertaken from a positivism philosophical position. This is because its aim is to objectively understand the role of SoC in the relationship between transactional leadership behaviours of Black top managers and employee commitment in the SOEs. A quantitative method was employed, utilising a cross-sectional survey method to gather data from direct reports of black top managers.

For sampling, a non-probability sampling method, specifically the purposive sampling technique, was used to select Black top managers in the SOEs who head organisational work units in SOEs as classified under *Public Finance Management Act of 1999 (PFMA)* and the *Companies Act 71 of 2008*. Purposive sampling is a research method used to select specific groups of respondents with the necessary characteristics



SoC, Span of control; MBE_A, Management by Exception (Active); MBE_P, Management by Exception (Passive); CR, Contingent Reward; AC, affective commitment; NC, normative commitment; CC, continuance commitment.

FIGURE 1: Conceptual model.

to ensure representation of the entire population under investigation (Nyimbili & Nyimbili 2024).

The study targeted 130 listed SOEs in South Africa across all its provinces (Gauteng, Limpopo, North-West, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, Western Cape, Northern Cape and Mpumalanga). The Black top managers within these SOEs were contacted to obtain their permission to allow their direct reports to participate in the study. A total of 26 SOEs consented, and the number and contact details of direct reports to Black top managers were obtained through their human resource departments. The study underwent a rigorous vetting process culminating in the receipt of an ethical clearance approval from a South African University. As part of the ethical considerations, the SOEs leadership provided informed consent, and confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the research process.

A total of 596 questionnaires were distributed to the direct reports of Black top managers. Out of these, 232 complete responses from direct reports of 38 Black top managers were received. All completed questionnaires were used to glean data for analysis purposes, which effectively means that the study achieved a 39% response rate.

Primary and secondary data were collected for the study. Secondary data were concerned with the SoC of identified Black top managers, while the primary data were for the constructs of transactional leadership behaviours and employee commitment. The secondary data on SoC for each Black top manager were obtained from the Human Resources Departments of the studied SOEs. For the primary data, the study utilised an adapted version of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), developed by Avolio and Bass (2004) for the measurement of the transactional leadership behaviours, and Meyer and Allen's (1997) three component model (TCM) questionnaire to assess types of employee commitment both using a five-point Likert scale. The reliability test for the MLQ and TCM scales showed Cronbach alpha values comparable those of previous studies as shown in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, the Cronbach alpha values obtained in the current study are greater than the 0.7 threshold prescribed by Louangrath (2018) and Taber (2018). Moreover, confirmatory factor analysis was employed to evaluate the model fit in the study. The values of root mean square error of the approximation (RMSEA) (0.06), goodness-of-fit index (GFI) (0.94), adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) (0.90) minimum discrepancy of confirmatory factor analysis/degrees of freedom, CFI (0.93) and minimum discrepancy of confirmatory factor analysis/degrees of freedom (CMIN/ df) (1.95), are all over the minimal thresholds recommended by Hair et al. (2010) and are therefore in the range of acceptable values.

The fit indices of transactional leadership measurement model indicated that even if the value of RMSEA (0.06) was

slightly above the recommended threshold of < 0.05 and the p -value (0.000) not meeting the recommended minimum threshold, other indices demonstrated satisfactory fit. The values of TLI (0.91), GFI (0.94), AGFI (0.90), CFI (0.93) and CMIN/ df (1.95), standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) (0.07) met the recommended minimum thresholds. As a result, the model was reasonably fit for the study. When assessing the employee commitment scale, a single-factor solution was used and showed 26.3% of the variance and given that it was below the 50.0% criterion indicated the possibility of certain hypothetical sub-constructs being statistically distinct. As a result of the reliability and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results, the scales for evaluating behaviours of the transactional leadership styles (TLS) and types of employee commitment were deemed suitable for use in this study.

Presentation of findings

Figure 2 and Figure 3 depicts the race distribution and level of education of respondents who took part in this study. Figure 2 shows the race distribution of participants as 62.1% Black, 21.6% White, 7.3% Coloured and 9.1% Indian.

As depicted in Figure 3, 7.2% of the total participants ($N = 232$) have a bachelor's degree, 19.4% have a diploma and 8.6% have a Grade 12 (National Senior) certificate.

TABLE 1a: Results of reliability analysis of measurement scales.

MLQ	
Study	Cronbach alpha value
Current study	0.90
Behery and Al-Nasser (2016)	0.79
Muenjohn and Armstrong (2008)	0.86

MLQ, Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire.

TABLE 1b: Results of reliability analysis of measurement scales.

TCM			
Study	Cronbach alpha value		
	AC	NC	CC
Current study	0.74	0.83	0.79
Yousef (2017)	0.94	0.88	0.91
Garg and Ramjee (2013)	0.91	0.90	0.89

AC, affective commitment; NC, normative commitment; CC, continuance commitment; TCM, Three Component Model.

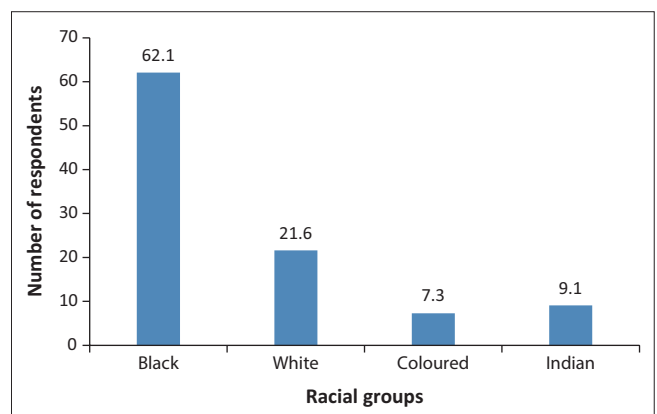


FIGURE 2: Respondents racial distribution ($N = 232$).

Kwan, Isa and Hin (2015) opine that effective leadership and a favourable SoC are important in the context of an organisation. To analyse the SoC, the demographics of the sample population under study were examined. The analysis was conducted using the number of subordinates each Black top manager oversees to ensure the measure of SoC is comparable across different managerial context. There were 38 black top managers in the sample. Table 2 indicates that the SoC associated with the studied Black top managers in the SOEs varies. The SoC ranged from 3 to 44 employees with the average SoC of 11 employees.

Even though there is no single universally acceptable SoC because of factors such as the size of the organisation, diversity function, level of hierarchy and task complexity (Shen, Zhong & Chen 2016; Zoller & Muldoon 2020), a maximum of 15 as the optimal SoC has been recommended (Brabandt 2016; Kim 2016). Thus it would appear that approximately 82% of Black top managers in the studied SOEs have a SoC that falls in the range of 1 to 15 employees.

Moderated regression analysis was conducted using IBM's Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to determine if SoC has a moderating effect on the relationship between transactional leadership behaviours and employee commitment. This required searching for the SoC measure under which the relationship between the leadership style and employee commitment is strengthened or weakened. Dawson (2014) notes that testing for moderation takes account of testing for any variable that affects the association between two or more other variables. Furthermore, Williams, Gavin and Hartman (2004) state that the strength of the relationship between an independent variable and a dependent variable could be affected by the level of a third variable, which is the moderator. In this study, SoC was considered as the third variable.

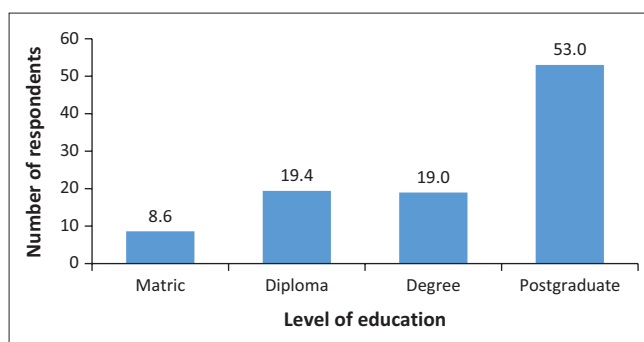


FIGURE 3: Respondents' level of education ($N = 232$).

TABLE 2: Span of control.

Span of control	1–5 employees	6–10 employees	11–15 employees	16–20 employees	21+ employees
Number of managers ($n = 38$)	5	19	7	4	3
Number of respondents ($N = 232$)	18	86	58	41	29
Mean SoC	4.3	7.6	12.1	17.2	30.8
Min SoC	3	6	11	16	21
Max SoC	5	10	14	19	44

SoC, span of control.

Table 3 shows the moderating role of SoC on the relationship between transactional leadership behaviours and employee commitment. The results reveal that the role of SoC is only statistically significant with respect to the relationship between the MBE_A factor of transactional leadership style and affective commitment ($p = 0.025$).

Therefore, the study rejects the hypotheses $H_{1.1}$, $H_{1.2}$ and $H_{1.3}$, which state that SoC moderates the relationship between the CR behaviour as a facet of the transactional leadership style of black top managers and the affective, normative and continuance commitment levels of their subordinates. The hypotheses $H_{3.1}$, $H_{3.2}$ and $H_{3.3}$, which state that SoC moderates the relationship between MBE_P and all types of commitment are not supported. Similarly, the results of the analysis indicate that $H_{2.2}$ and $H_{2.3}$, which state that SoC moderates the relationship that MBE_A behaviours have with normative and continuance commitment, respectively, are statistically not supported. However, the study supports the hypothesis $H_{2.1}$ that SoC moderates the relationship between the MBE_A active behaviour and the affective commitment of their subordinates.

To determine whether SoC moderates the relationship between leadership styles and employee commitment, a moderated regression analysis was performed. This analysis involves identifying the SoC conditions that either strengthen or weaken the relationship between MBE_A behaviour and the affective commitment that was statistically supported. The test results of the moderation depicted in Table 4 indicate the effect of the slope transactional leadership behaviours (X) predicting employee commitment (M) at different levels of the SoC.

It can be seen that at low SoC, correlation coefficients reflect a negative slope and as the SoC becomes high, the correlation coefficient turns into positive. For example, where SoC = 3,

TABLE 3: The moderating role of span of control on the relationship between transactional leadership behaviours (X) and employee commitment (M).

Transactional leadership behaviour (X)	Employee commitment (M)	Effect (P)
Contingent reward	Affective	0.328
Management by Exception (Active)		0.025
Management by Exception (Passive)		0.890
Contingent reward	Continuance	0.556
Management by Exception (Active)		0.545
Management by Exception (Passive)		0.427
Contingent reward	Normative	0.817
Management by Exception (Active)		0.562
Management by Exception (Passive)		0.754

the slope between X and M is negative ($r = -0.1815$) and where SoC = 44, the slope is positive ($r = 0.4028$). At these points, it is important to emphasise that the relationship between the variables is statistically significant given the p -values of 0.04 and 0.05 associated with the extremes of the SoC identified in the study. The results of the study showed that in the studied SOEs, the relationship between MBE_A of the transactional leadership behaviours and affective commitment of employees is strengthened where there is a high SoC.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed no moderating effect of the SoC on the relationship between CR behaviour as a facet of transactional leadership style and all levels of employee commitment. Similarly, the results showed that SoC does not moderate the relationship between MBE_P behaviour as a facet of transactional leadership style and all levels of employee commitment as well as the relationship between MBE_A as a facet of transactional leadership style and employee's normative or continuous levels of employee commitment. The study found that SoC moderates the relationship between MBE_A behaviour as a facet of transactional leadership style and affective commitment, and that the relationship is strengthened as the SoC increases.

According to studies by Jankelová and Joniaková (2021) as well as Sharma, Patel and Pandey (2021), the narrower SoC is preferable over the broader SoC because it allows for a close interaction between the leader and direct subordinates. This view suggests that when the SoC increases, the leader becomes increasingly remote from the staff, expecting them

to perform autonomously. Andersson et al. (2019) opine that the benefit is that the minimal need to seek for permission boosts the pace of administrative processes and the organisation's ability to be agile in all its operations, from risk management to customer satisfaction. Reitzig (2022) opines that employees who exhibit attributes of need for achievement, conscientiousness and locus of control, as well as those who are educated, thrive in a high delegation environment. Given the level of education and the high level of management of the studied sample of the population, it is plausible that they would function independently from Black top managers, thus reinforcing the relationship between MBE_P facet of transactional leadership and all employee commitment levels, which this study has demonstrated is not the case. This suggests that even when the SOEs environment demands the subordinates to function independently when the SoC increases (Jacobsen, Hansen & Pedersen 2023), Black top managers may still be expected to constantly monitor the performance of their direct reports.

Conclusion

The study sought to establish whether SoC moderates the relationship between leadership styles of Black top managers and commitment levels of employees in the SOEs in South Africa. The results show that SoC moderates the relationship between MBE_A behaviour and affective commitment but not any other relationship as it pertains to transactional leadership behaviours and types of employee commitment. The study contributes to African leadership theory by identifying the relationship that develops between transactional leadership behaviours and different types of commitment as the SoC increases in the studied South African SOEs.

TABLE 4: The effect of span of control on the relationship between Management by Exception (Active) and affective commitment.

SoC	Effect (r)	SE	t	p
3.0000	-0.1815	0.0890	-2.0394	0.0426
4.1171	-0.1656	0.0840	-1.9704	0.0500
5.0500	-0.1523	0.0801	-1.9005	0.0586
7.1000	-0.1231	0.0725	-1.6973	0.0910
9.1500	-0.0939	0.0666	-1.4100	0.1599
11.2000	-0.0646	0.0628	-1.0298	0.3042
13.2500	-0.0354	0.0615	-0.5758	0.5653
15.3000	-0.0062	0.0630	-0.0987	0.9215
17.3500	0.0230	0.0670	0.3433	0.7317
19.4000	0.0522	0.0731	0.7143	0.4758
21.4500	0.0814	0.0808	1.0073	0.3149
23.5000	0.1106	0.0898	1.2322	0.2192
25.5500	0.1399	0.0996	1.4037	0.1618
27.6000	0.1691	0.1101	1.5352	0.1261
29.6500	0.1983	0.1211	1.6373	0.1029
31.7000	0.2275	0.1324	1.7178	0.0872
33.7500	0.2567	0.1441	1.7821	0.0761
35.8000	0.2859	0.1559	1.8344	0.0679
37.8500	0.3152	0.1679	1.8773	0.0618
39.9000	0.3444	0.1800	1.9131	0.0570
41.9500	0.3736	0.1922	1.9433	0.0532
44.0000	0.4028	0.2046	1.9690	0.0502

SoC, span of control; SE, standard error.

The practical implication of this study is that knowledge acquired could assist SOE leadership in determining relevant leadership behaviours that result in employee commitment in instances where they are forced to make decisions that affect their SoC. While the study concentrated on the role of SoC in the relationship between transactional leadership behaviours of Black top managers and employee commitment in the South African SOEs, further research could be conducted to identify specific MBE_A principles that could be beneficial in SOEs in light of the study's findings.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

T.R.M. contributed to conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation and writing of original draft. C.E.E. contributed to methodology, writing review and editing process and acted as supervisor.

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Data availability

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article and data files are available from the corresponding author, T.R.M., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. The article does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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