Every Cloud Has a Silver Lining - Leadership Interventions in Times of Uncertainty

Schmitt, J., Nielsen, K., Axtell, C., Vasquez, C. (2024)

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# Abstract

**Purpose:** Current political, economic and societal developments have led to high uncertainty in organisations, which may negatively impact employee well-being. Leaders play a crucial role in this context. This study explores how interventions support leaders and their followers in times of uncertainty.

**Approach:** We conducted 22 interviews to evaluate the experiences of two interventions, coaching and mental health awareness training, both implemented in two corporate organisations in Czechia during a merger and acquisition and the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Findings:** Our findings show that both interventions equipped participants with resources to manage change, such as increased self-awareness and self-efficacy, and improved coping strategies for stressful situations. Participants gained better leadership skills and knowledge to support employees and themselves when facing mental health issues. Our findings reveal that the contextual factors in the two organisations led to different mechanisms and content for coaching but similar mechanisms in mental health awareness training.

**Originality:** This research contributes to the understanding of targeted interventions to support leaders during times of uncertainty. Implications for practitioners and Human Resources when developing context-specific support strategies are discussed.

Keywords: Leadership Interventions, Well-being, Coaching, Mental Health Awareness Training, Process Evaluation, Uncertainty, M&A, COVID-19 Pandemic

# Introduction

Since the early 2020s, unprecedented global disruptions, including war, the energy crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly impacted organisations and their employees. Research suggests these changes predominantly affect employee well-being (EWB) negatively (Kniffin *et al.*, 2021; Wittmers & Maier, 2023). A common response by organisations to adjust to the dynamic environment is via mergers, acquisitions (M&A) and organisational change (Cooke *et al*., 2021), which tend to adversely affect EWB (de Jong *et al.,* 2016; Ngirande, 2021). Consequently, research on mitigating these effects, such as leadership support or job redesign, has grown (Cooke *et al.*, 2021; Klebe *et al.*, 2021). While leaders play a pivotal role in managing organisational change *(*Bickerich *et al.,* 2018;Liang *et al.,* 2022*)*, they are often poorly equipped to fulfil this role (Kniffin *et al.*, 2021; Wittmers & Maier, 2023). However, less attention has been paid to what interventions may equip leaders with the necessary competencies to manage change (Cooke *et al.*, 2021) and which mechanisms make these interventions work under such circumstances (Nielsen & Miraglia, 2017).

The main objective of this study is to explore the mechanisms of leader interventions aiming to build resources during times of uncertainty. Using a qualitative approach, this research offers an in-depth understanding of the experiences of those participating in interventions, specifically, the perceived challenges generated by the turbulent context and how leader interventions supported participants in coping with those. This research presents the following contributions: we contribute to the literature on organisational change by illustrating how similar circumstances (M&A and pandemic) in two different organisations have diverse implications for employees and managers, and by analysing how interventions implemented during turbulent times enable leaders and employees to cope with the challenges they face. Specifically, we provide in-depth insights into the mechanisms of the interventions and the participants’ perceptions. Moreover, our study contributes to the literature on interventions and their interplay with the organisational context. While context is often considered as a hindering factor for interventions (Abildgaard *et al.*, 2016) we provide evidence of how interventions can address these disturbances and provide resources to mitigate their detrimental impact on EWB. It is our hope to deepen the understanding of how to support leaders and employees in times of uncertainty through interventions, ultimately guiding practitioners, Human Resources (HR) representatives and management in designing and implementing context-specific leader interventions.

# Literature Review

Considering the adverse effects of organisational uncertainty, the protection of well-being has been of scholarly interest over past decades. EWB refers to the overall health, happiness, and satisfaction of individuals in the workplace (Day *et al.*, 2014). While mental health is a critical component of EWB, the latter term extends beyond mental health, encompassing various aspects of satisfaction, fulfilment, and quality of life at work. EWB is impacted by the individuals’ ability to cope with stress (ibid.). Organisational change is one factor potentially causing stress, as it leads to a higher risk of resource loss (Holmgreen *et al.,* 2017).

Employers can support employees during times of uncertainty by providing them with the means to mitigate the detrimental impact. Considerable research points to the pivotal role of leaders in supporting employees in times of uncertainty (Harrison, 2024). This is due to the leaders’ role as ‘internal change agent’ (Teerikangas, 2020, p. 280), but also because of their impact on EWB, which is even stronger amidst uncertainty (Klebe *et al*., 2021). This makes the leader an important job resource (Nielsen *et al.*, 2017). An important aspect for the protection of EWB is leaders’ emotional intelligence, which encompasses a combination of skills and capabilities essential for leadership, such as awareness of followers’ emotions, specifically crucial during uncertainty and other scenarios coming with strong emotional reactions (Côté, 2014; Santos De Souza & Chimenti, 2024). Leaders need to anticipate the challenges of change and provide a space for employees to justify their personal reasons for changing (Ruhl *et al*., 2023). Leaders should foster a post-merger identity to retain or create the employees’ feeling of belongingness (Mühlemann *et al*., 2022). Li et al. (2021) stress the importance of effective managerial communication throughout the change process. Yet, this role and the change itself create additional demands for leaders, such as the obligation to reorganise work processes, handle emotionally challenging situations, make decisions and communicate under uncertainty, deal with other people’s feelings (Burr *et al.*, 2019) or heightened workload (Wittmers & Maier, 2023).

Various studies have explored leader interventions to support them in their role of navigating through times of uncertainty, such as coaching (see Bickerich *et al*., 2018; de Haan, 2019; Grant, 2014; Percy & Dow, 2021) or training programs (see Barrech *et al*., 2018; De Brún & McAuliffe, 2023; Schubin *et al*., 2023). Effects include an increase in leaders’ self-efficacy, resilience and well-being (Schubin *et al*., 2023) and reduced job insecurity in leaders and their followers (Barrech *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, they support leaders in dealing with change by enabling them to adopt new perspectives (Bickerich *et al.*, 2018) and cultivate collaborative work environments (Percy & Dow, 2021). The emphasis on leader interventions draws on the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018), which underscores the importance of cultivating, retaining and proactively accumulating resources to facilitate a supportive work environment and mitigate stress. Leadership training provides a vital resource for both leaders and their followers. According to COR theory, resources can transfer from leader to follower through interpersonal interactions, creating positive or negative crossover effects. For instance, leaders’ self-efficacy can enhance followers' confidence and resource levels, while resource loss in leaders can lead to similar losses in their followers (Hobfoll *et al*., 2018). Accordingly, it is crucial to provide leaders with effective interventions that equip them with the necessary resources during uncertainty, such as skills to cope with adaptive challenges, which then protect leaders’ and followers’ well-being (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018; Nöthel *et al.*, 2023).

Most studies are limited to analysing the outcomes of those interventions (von Thiele Schwarz *et al.*, 2021). To our knowledge, there is no study identifying the mechanisms explaining how interventions support leaders and their employees during change processes. Also, scholars argue for the importance of including the intervention context in the evaluation, because how an intervention aligns with the organisational landscape strongly impacts its success (Roodbari *et al.*, 2022a). Considering the heterogeneity of organisational change (Cooke *et al.*, 2021) and the complexity and diversity of interventions (Roodbari *et al*., 2022b), we see a paucity of research, as the existing literature consists primarily of stand-alone results providing evidence for how the intervention works in a given context.

Only by investigating how interventions’ mechanisms facilitate and hinder specific changes can we understand how interventions work under given circumstances. We address this by examining two leader interventions implemented during times of uncertainty: leadership coaching and mental health awareness training. This study aims to analyse how these interventions support leaders and their employees during times of uncertainty. We apply a framework for the process evaluation of interventions by Nielsen and Randall (2013), containing three crucial elements: Context, intervention, and participants’ mental models. ‘Context’ captures the conditions in which interventions work. It includes events within the work environment that are not part of the intervention (Edwards & Winkel, 2018). Context can be categorised into omnibus (e.g., the general pre-intervention setting, such as organisational culture or EWB) and discrete context (e.g., concurrent changes taking place during the implementation, such as organisational restructuring) (Roodbari, *et al.*, 2022b). The relevant contextual factors need to be revealed as they modify the intervention process (Edwards & Winkel, 2018). The element ‘intervention’ includes intervention design, process and implementation. ‘Mental models’ are the participants’ perceptions and appraisals of the intervention, such as participants’ expectations, their readiness to change and their satisfaction with the intervention. This also comprises the changes in mental models triggered by the intervention, including changes in knowledge, awareness or attitude. Changing mental models is the key to successful implementation of interventions and effective change processes (Nielsen & Randall, 2013). In applying this model, we are able to gain a broad, exploratory perspective on process evaluation whilst at the same time focus on the crucial elements with evidence-based guidance to ask the right questions (ibid.).

In line with the model applied, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the key contextual factors surrounding the implementation of leader interventions, and how do these factors hinder or facilitate the intervention implementation?

RQ2: How do the interventions work, with special regard to how they support leaders and their employees in times of uncertainty?

RQ3: Which changes in participants’ mental models do the interventions bring about?

By applying a qualitative approach to evaluate the same two interventions implemented in two different organisations in the context of M&A and further disruptive factors, we explore (1) the contextual setting surrounding the implementation of interventions, (2) the intervention design and implementation, (3) the mental models of participants as well as the changes that were triggered by the intervention. Thus, we are responding to the call for research that examines how to support leaders during times of uncertainty (Nöthel *et al*., 2023). Qualitative data is central to capturing unforeseeable aspects in the process evaluation, specifically when investigating unexpected events (Roodbari, *et al*., 2022b). Employing a qualitative approach allows for a thorough examination of the context and participants’ experiences, addressing the demand for more robust evidence in this field (de Haan, 2019; von Thiele Schwarz *et al.*, 2021). Capturing participants’ narratives uncovers the intervention’s mechanisms that participants believe make it work and explains the role of contextual factors facilitating or hindering such mechanisms (Abildgaard *et al.*, 2016).

# Methods

## Research Context

The study was conducted in two corporate organisations located in Czechia. Prior to the intervention, we conducted focus group discussions to reveal the organisational needs regarding well-being promotion and to assess psychological risk factors, drawing on evidence that needs-based interventions support their effectiveness and training transfer (Lacerenza *et al.*, 2017). The results of the focus groups were discussed with employees, line and senior management, and were used to identify which interventions would address their needs .

Organisation One is a retail company. While conducting the needs analysis, it was officially announced to the public and the research team that a larger UK-based company would acquire the organisation. The acquisition coincided with Covid-19 restrictions. The needs analysis revealed a need for leaders to be trained in supporting employees to cope with their work demands, especially in a time of uncertainty (Christensen et al., 2024; De Angelis et al., 2020).

Organisation Two is an IT company consisting of young IT specialists. While conducting the needs analysis, the research team was informed that this organisation would be acquired by a US-based company. The needs analysis revealed that employees lacked vision and a clear direction, especially during disruptions. EWB was cared for at the level of benefits and flexibility, but there was a lack of management development in this area (Christensen et al., 2024; De Angelis et al., 2020).

Based on these results, we proposed two interventions for leaders: Leadership coaching and Leadership Mental Health Awareness Training (MHAT). Leadership coaching was selected to provide a space where leaders can seek guidance for individual issues they want to address. MHAT was selected to train leaders to identify and support workers with mental health problems. In agreement with representatives from both organisations, we decided to implement them consecutively in both organisations. In Organisation One, the interventions took place between April 2021 and February 2022, and in Organisation Two, between January 2022 and December 2022. Participation in both interventions was voluntary due to the positive impact this has on training transfer (Blume *et al*., 2010) and was open to all leaders and employees with leadership potential.

Leadership coaching is based on a positive leadership approach (Malinga *et al*., 2019) and Whitmore's GROW model (2013), applied as individual case coaching (Grant, 2014). The intervention aims to enhance the personal and professional development of the participants, their psychosocial well-being and, thus, create healthy organisational results. The intervention includes six individual one-on-one, one-hour-long coaching sessions at monthly intervals. It was facilitated by trained coaches with a background in psychology.

MHAT was conceptualised based on the Road to Mental Readiness Program developed by the Canadian Forces Health Services (Granek *et al*., 2017). The intervention aims to equip managers with knowledge about common mental health disorders, reduce stigma about mental health-related issues, and train managers in providing support for employees struggling with mental health issues. It was facilitated in small groups with an interactive format. Each group had four to eight participants and was led by two trained psychologists. The training consisted of four units, each 3.5 hours long. The provider facilitating both interventions is located in Czechia.

## Study Design and Sample

As our team of researchers was in charge of the implementation and partially involved in the facilitation of MHAT, we became aware of the disruption that the acquisition caused in Organisation One. We observed how it affected stakeholders and disrupted the implementation process. We interviewed participants applying process evaluation after the intervention period. The sample consisted of intervention participants, approached randomly by HR, recruited via email. Participation in the interviews was voluntary. In Organisation One, we conducted 11 interviews (seven managers, four employees) in June and July 2022. In Organisation Two, we conducted 11 interviews (four managers, seven employees) in January 2023. In total, we interviewed 23% of all coaching participants and 24% of all MHAT participants. The average interview time was 50 minutes. The interviews focused on the participants’ perception of the interventions and the contextual setting in which they took place. Using a semi-structured guide with open questions, we allowed each participant to adequately describe their experiences. All participants gave their informed consent prior to being interviewed.

## Qualitative Data Analysis

First, we split the data into four units, separating data collected in Organisations One and Two and data describing experiences of coaching and MHAT, allowing us to compare the two organisations and the two interventions. As mentioned, we applied the framework by Nielsen and Randall (2013) to analyse the data. We used qualitative template analysis (Brooks *et al*., 2015), applying the predefined codes “Context”, “Intervention”, and “Mental Models” deductively. We then developed further subcodes inductively in subsequent rounds of analysis. Overall, we developed 109 codes. As our data consisted of subjective descriptions of experiences, we synthesised coherent experiences and compared diverse experiences. Based on RQ1, when analysing the context, we investigated the omnibus context to understand who the participants were, what their motivation for participation was and how the intervention fitted into the organisational culture. The discrete context was crucial in this research, exploring the specific events that influenced the intervention, mainly M&A and the pandemic. In RQ2, we aimed to gain insight into whether the intervention targeted the problems of the participants and the disruptive context, as well as the working mechanisms of the intervention, (e.g. how the participants perceived the intervention content, to which degree they were involved and engaged in the intervention, and whether they could apply it to their work environment). Addressing RQ3, we investigated the participants’ mental models, aiming to find out what their mental models were in relation to dealing with change, their attitudes towards mental health and leadership, as well as to explore what changes in mental models were triggered by the interventions. Finally, we focused on the changes in behaviour and mental models regarding participants' or their followers’ mental health, and whether the participants felt supported in dealing with the challenges of the disruptions.

# Findings

## Context

*Acquisition*

In Organisation One, the analysis underscores the acquisition procedure and subsequent reorganisation as a period marked by significant uncertainty and unease. Specific challenges included high employee turnover, process instability, multiple changes in leadership, new responsibilities and a pervasive sense of upheaval due to numerous, simultaneous changes. The acquisition notably altered corporate culture, leading to reduced autonomy, protracted and centralised decision-making, and a neglect of personnel development. Such changes eroded employees’ sense of organisational belonging. Despite these challenges, senior management disregarded employees’ concerns (see Table I Participant O1#03).

In Organisation Two, participants initially experienced uncertainty with the announcement of the acquisition, stemming from the unknown implications it might entail. Nevertheless, this apprehension was substantially mitigated by the acquiring organisation’s commitment to transparent communication and minimal disruptions to daily operations. The acquiring organisation was described as more corporate but also as prioritising people and their well-being. Anticipating the potential challenges, the CEO took a pre-emptive stance by advocating for the implementation of support interventions (see Table I Participant O2#01).

*COVID-19 Pandemic*

In both organisations, the intervention period occurred when social distancing measures were partly in place. In Organisation One, several participants noted a negative impact on their well-being and workplace relationships, as they lost touch with colleagues. In contrast, two participants highlighted the benefits of remote work, citing increased family time after having a baby. Participants holding a leadership position experienced remote work as challenging for fostering team collaboration and adapting work formats (see Table I Participant O1#06).

In Organisation Two, many employees worked remotely based on individual preference. While the sudden shift to remote work was portrayed as difficult, they eventually established well-functioning modes of remote collaboration. Some argued that the nature of the organisation’s business benefited the smooth adjustment (see Table I Participant O2#02).

In both organisations, the simultaneous occurrence of disruptions (acquisition and pandemic) was particularly demanding (see Table I Participant O1#10).

*Contextual Factors Impacting Coaching*

In Organisation One, coaching participants described how the constant changes in the organisation, its culture and the high turnover of their colleagues led them to reevaluate their professional commitment. They experienced high uncertainty, felt overwhelmed by constant changes and high workload and lost their sense of belongingness, thereby shaping coaching sessions to address acquisition-related challenges.

In Organisation Two, several participants addressed coping with high workloads in their coaching sessions, caused partly by the disruptive context, e.g., the change to remote work and the acquisition. The acquisition, coupled with positive market development, facilitated organisational growth, which then created opportunities for career development. As a result, many participants focused on pursuing career goals in their sessions.

*Contextual Factors Impacting MHAT*

Both organisations lacked awareness and knowledge of mental health. Many participants, especially in Organisation One, realised the impact of the disruptions on EWB and the pandemic increased attention on the topic of mental health. Some participants experienced a negative impact on their mental health, including high workload and time pressure. The context created a need and interest for training on mental health awareness.

INSERT TABLE I HERE

### Differences in Context

Comparing disruptions in both organisations reveals contrasting experiences, particularly regarding EWB and adaptability to change. A significant factor is how senior management approached change. Contextual factors strongly modified the content of leadership coaching, whereas for MHAT we find rather similar contextual factors surrounding the intervention in both organisations, which underlined the need for such training.

## Interventions

### Leadership Coaching

#### In Organisation One, coaching sessions addressed coping with uncertainty, questioning future prospects within the organisation, and feeling overwhelmed by the dynamic environment, which mainly stemmed from acquisition-related disruptions. The shift of perspective required a positive approach and created self-awareness of the participants’ personal needs, values, and capabilities (see Table II Participant O1#02).

Participants who felt overwhelmed were advised to approach things step-by-step, including visualisation techniques to track progress and to apply a positive approach in focusing on accomplishments. Some participants described setting boundaries and communicating them at work. In regard to managing high workload, participants described being able to transfer learned techniques to work and still apply them several months after the coaching sessions. Some participants describe spotting the challenges they experienced also in their employees and thus addressed this in their coaching session to support their employees better in coping with changes. They perceived that this contributed to improving EWB and helped their subordinates cope with the disruptions they faced.

#### Regarding participants’ mental models, they described actively seeking support to better cope with the disruptions. Several participants specifically point out appreciating coaching as a support during the acquisition. The changes in mental models are implied by participants describing how their feelings of being overwhelmed were alleviated, and the challenges they faced were perceived as more manageable. Participants gained a sense of control over their own accomplishments in managing change. The majority of participants reported that coaching helped them to find their roles within the new organisation. A few participants reported that breaking down tasks into small, manageable steps had a calming effect.

#### As leaders, there was a change in participants’ mental models as they understood the impact of disruptions on EWB, but also the importance of the leadership role during change. They became more adept at recognising signs of struggle in their team and improved communication on mental health issues (see Table II Participant O1#04).

#### In Organisation Two, a subset of participants highlighted a transformative impact of coaching on their clarity and confidence towards career advancement. Through reflection techniques and strengths-based coaching, these participants felt empowered to actively pursue their career objectives (see Table II Participant O2#08). This empowerment was manifested in two participants who, encouraged by coaching, successfully secured promotions.

Participants who sought support for coping with excessive workload described applying techniques to visualise their progress or the time they dedicated to different topics in a pie chart. This approach facilitated a heightened needs-awareness and the adoption of self-compassion practices. A specific example was observed in a leader who, post-coaching, adopted more proactive work delegation and reorganisation strategies to mitigate stress upon returning from leave.

Regarding mental models, participants described gaining clarity in work life and their career goals, and becoming more certain about what they want from their careers. They felt more self-aware and assertive after their coaching experience. Ultimately, this fostered empowerment among participants. Participants who sought support for managing high workload reported they were able to detach from work and felt less overloaded. They felt more in control of their accomplishments and experienced greater self-efficacy.

INSERT TABLE II HERE

The findings for coaching show distinct focal points. In Organisation One coaching focused on navigating personal and leadership challenges induced by the acquisition, activating diverse support mechanisms. In Organisation Two, coaching primarily targeted career development and managing workload. This distinction emphasises the intervention’s ability to target specific individual and organisational needs.

### Mental Health Awareness Training

The analysis of MHAT revealed that, unlike coaching, the intervention contents and the participants’ mental models were rather similar across both organisations. We, therefore, decided to analyse this intervention as one sample:

The intervention content aligned with the training aims and concept. Participants learned how to spot and address mental health issues and learned about measures to facilitate healthier workplaces. The interactive format was particularly highlighted as it allowed participants to discuss real-life cases. The positive group atmosphere established trust, and informative content was delivered in an engaging and resourceful way. Many reported that the training equipped them with tools to design work environments more healthily or to focus on mental health in leader-employee interaction (see Table III Participant O2#04). Gained knowledge also benefited one-on-one meetings.

Participants perceived it as helpful to assess their well-being in relation to stress and overload, which enabled them to craft their job in a healthy way. Further examples of training transfer given are addressing personal needs, setting healthy boundaries, managing stressful situations better and taking breaks during the day.

All participants indicated a change in mental models: they became aware of how common mental illnesses are and how important it is that these are addressed appropriately. Several participants particularly expressed how this training shifted their perception that caring for employees’ mental health is crucial to leadership (see Table III Participant O2#08 and O1#06). Further, participants described MHAT changing how they interacted with their employees and strengthening the leader-employee relationship. The training improved the leader’s empathy, reduced stigmatisation, encouraged personal resource awareness and healthy work detachment.

INSERT TABLE III HERE

Summarising the findings of MHAT, we see that the intervention worked similarly in both organisations, demonstrating the intervention’s hardiness against contextual disruptions and providing continuous support in managing situations that challenged mental health.

# Discussion

This study explored how interventions for leaders support them and their employees in times of uncertainty. Considering RQ1 (the key contextual factors surrounding the implementation of the interventions for leaders that hinder or facilitate the intervention process), our findings suggest that although the contextual events (the acquisition and the COVID pandemic) are somewhat similar, the challenges caused within the two organisations vary. These diverse effects align with the literature on organisational change (Cooke *et al.*, 2021) and stress the importance of closely examining the context from the participants’ perspective, revealing the contextual embeddedness of the data. Whilst there are many factors influencing the acquisition, the analysis identified senior management communication as one factor that can support a merger (as in Organisation Two) or, when it is poor (as in Organisation One), negatively impact a merging procedure. This adds evidence to claims of the importance of sound and transparent management communication during change (Li *et al.,* 2021).

Our findings suggest that the implementation process of leadership coaching was largely modified by the context, which stimulated different intervention content in both organisations. In contrast, for MHAT, the analysis shows strong similarities in the intervention process and participants’ mental models. Attempting to explain the reactiveness to the context of the two interventions, the format can partly account for this: Leadership coaching was facilitated as individual case coaching, meaning the content of the session was subject to the challenges participants were facing. In Organisation One, the changes induced by the acquisition were the most dominant issues, while in Organisation Two, the topics addressed were common issues and stressors in a business context (Lesener *et al.*, 2019). MHAT, on the other hand, applies an interactive but structured training concept. While allowing for the discussion of real-life cases, the facilitators steered the discussions to mental health topics in the workplace. Although subjectively, mental health appeared to be more challenged in Organisation One, considering the context analysed, the cases discussed in MHAT sessions were rather similar.

Regarding RQ2 and 3 (how the intervention worked, how it supported leaders and employees in times of uncertainty and which changes in participants’ mental models were initiated) the findings provide evidence for the effectiveness of both interventions. Drawing on COR theory (Hobfoll *et al.,* 2018), we observe how both interventions equipped participants with needs-focused resources to cope with the new demands evolving from the context. Notably, leadership coaching was instrumental in developing leaders’ emotional intelligence, improving self-awareness and emotional regulation, which were skills essential for coping with the acquisition challenges experienced by Organisation One participants. Through different techniques, they felt empowered and gained clarity in their work life and their future in the organisation. It enabled them to address their needs and to feel in charge. It helped leaders in supporting their employees during uncertainty by better recognising and addressing issues when employees are struggling. In Organisation Two, we found similar changes, such as increased self-efficacy, self-awareness, empowerment and clarity, but applied to the context of pursuing personal career goals. The changes triggered by coaching are in accord with the needs identified in the literature regarding individual skills, such as self-efficacy (Nwanzu & Babalola, 2019), individual resilience and support to integrate changes into their work context (Cooke *et al*., 2021). Regarding the leader role, Mühlemann et al. (2022) claim that leaders are responsible for creating a sense of belongingness for their team. However, in Organisation One, the results show that leaders themselves lost their belongingness and that reflection and a shift in perspective helped them to regain it. Still, fostering a sense of belonging was not integrated into leadership behaviour. Considering the changes in participants’ mental models through the lens of Frederickson’s broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), we argue that the positive experiences of leaders, such as the opening of new perspectives, a healthy degree of detachment and experienced self-efficacy build not only individual resources but also social resources, which is beneficial for followers (Vacharkulksemsuk & Fredrickson, 2013).

MHAT, although not tailored to the challenges of the acquisition or COVID-19, mitigated the impact of these disruptions on EWB by providing leaders with resources to protect their followers’ well-being. Whilst adding to the literature on how the disruptive environment negatively influenced EWB (de Jong *et al*., 2016), our findings go beyond existing research by demonstrating how MHAT supported and protected EWB amidst a disruptive context. MHAT made leaders aware of the importance of mental health and that caring for employees’ health is part of their leadership role. It fostered their emotional intelligence to see the signals if someone is struggling and to address the issue. Participants described how they changed their behaviour in interactions with followers and how they implemented changes in the work environment that supported individuals with mental health problems. Besides the leadership perspective, MHAT also created awareness of the participants’ needs and fostered more healthy, self-caring behaviour. By focusing on the leaders’ health-specific orientation towards their followers and their own care, MHAT cultivates health-oriented leadership, specifically relevant during crises (Klebe *et al*., 2021). Considering crossover effects, we argue that by equipping leaders with the necessary resources, the interventions ultimately lead to a more resilient workforce (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Thus, the positive experience of both interventions can broaden the constructive outlook of participants to face upcoming challenges (Liu *et al.*, 2024).

#### Strengths and Limitations

A particular strength of this study is the analysis of interventions in two different organisations that underwent change, allowing us to analyse the process of those interventions in two contextual settings. Analysing 22 interviews, provided rich qualitative data to draw on.

This study is not without limitations. In Organisation One, where the challenges induced by M&A led to a high turnover, we see a risk of survivor bias, as we were only able to interview those who stayed in the organisation. However, at the same time, we value the importance of understanding the survivors’ perspective (de Jong *et al*., 2016). The diversity of contexts and change processes is also a limitation, as our sample includes different sectors and different national cultures of the acquiring organisations. In addition, the temporal offset of interventions placed them in different scenarios of the pandemic restrictions, which may have impacted the findings. One of the authors actively participated in implementing the intervention and facilitating three MHAT sessions. Whilst acknowledging potential bias, this involvement informed the research and offered additional insights into the intervention.

Further, we wish to discuss methodological limitations. While process evaluation offers valuable insights into the implementation and reception of interventions, the exploration of context is rather open and unstructured. Other methods, such as Effect Modifier Assessment (Edwards & Winkel, 2018; Nobrega *et al.*, 2023), could be used in the future to complement process evaluation adding additional insight from participatory workshops and a structured approach that distinguishes between contextual factors linked to the intervention and those that are not.

#### Implications for practice

Our findings translate into several practical applications for organisations implementing leader interventions during uncertainty. Leadership coaching proves valuable during organisational changes by addressing context-specific challenges, whilst MHAT demonstrates effectiveness across contexts in enhancing leaders' capacity to support employee well-being. The findings highlight the importance of transparent senior management communication and that leaders require support in maintaining their sense of belongingness before fostering it within teams. Proactive implementation of these interventions may enable organisations to build resilience before periods of uncertainty emerge.

# Conclusion

This research underscores the critical role of interventions in supporting leaders during uncertainty. Our findings highlight the importance of tailoring interventions to each organisation’s unique context. This study enriches the understanding of organisational change and offers valuable insights for designing and implementing effective interventions in diverse settings. The practical implications of our research are to foster a deepened knowledge about supporting leaders by responding to the call for actionable leadership development strategies (Nöthel *et al.*, 2023). By providing the in-depth experience of participants overcoming challenges enabled by interventions, we hope to provide valuable insight for practitioners working in this field. Expecting a landscape of further disruptions, this research provides timely guidance on negotiating these uncertain times.

# Research Ethics

This study gained ethical approval for the data collected within the project H-Work Multilevel Interventions to Promote Mental Health in SMEs and Public Workplaces by the ethics committee of University of Bologna, listed under Prot. nr.185076 of 11/09/2020.

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## Table 1: Interview participants List

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **IS 1** | **manager/ employee** | **gender** | **Leadership Coaching** | **MHAT** |
| Participant 01 | manager | m | X | X |
| Participant 02 | employee | f | X |  |
| Participant 03 | manager | m | X |  |
| Participant 04 | manager | m | X | X |
| Participant 05 | manager | m | X | X |
| Participant 06 | manager | m | X | X |
| Participant 07 | employee | f | X |  |
| Participant 08 | employee | f | X |  |
| Participant 09 | manager | f | X |  |
| Participant 10 | manager | f | X | X |
| Participant 11 | employee | f | X |  |
| **IS 2** | **manager/ employee** | **gender** | **Leadership Coaching** | **MHAT** |
| Participant 01 | manager | m |  |  |
| Participant 02 | employee | f | X | X |
| Participant 03 | employee | m |  | X |
| Participant 04 | manager | m | X | X |
| Participant 05 | employee | f | X | X |
| Participant 06 | manager | m | X | X |
| Participant 07 | employee | m | X |  |
| Participant 08 | employee | m | X | X |
| Participant 09 | manager | m | X | X |
| Participant 10 | manager | m | X | X |
| Participant 11 | employee | m |  | X |