

LEADER'S WELL-BEING A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF LITERATURE**Shivani Peer¹**

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ABSTRACT

Leaders are central to organizational direction, performance, and resilience, yet their well-being remains underexplored and conceptually fragmented. This review consolidates research published between 2015 and 2025 in SCOPUS-listed journals to clarify the characteristics of leader well-being. The review finds that leaders' well-being is multidimensional, encompassing affective, cognitive, social, professional, and psychosomatic domains that are often studied in isolation, leading to theoretical fragmentation. Addressing these gaps can help academicians develop integrated models of leadership psychological and physical health and guide organizations in designing interventions that enhance resilience, performance, and sustainable leadership pipelines.

Keywords: *Narrative literature review, leader, well-being, happiness at work*

Paper type- Literature review

INTRODUCTION

Well-being is a positive physical, mental, and social state that enables individuals to realize their abilities, manage stress, and contribute productively (Diener, 2000). While employee well-being has received growing attention (S R & Mukherjee, 2024), the well-being of leaders remains underexplored in organizational behavior and HRM (Oc & Chintakananda, 2025). Existing research often isolates affective, cognitive, or psychosomatic elements, producing a fragmented view of this complex phenomenon. This review addresses that gap by synthesizing studies across five interrelated domains: affective, cognitive, social, professional, and psychosomatic.

Leaders represent a distinct group whose well-being merits focused attention, given the pressures and unique stressors of leadership roles (Bayighomog & Arasli, 2019). Their well-being shapes organizational effectiveness, culture, and employee outcomes (Richter-Killenberg & Volmer,

2022) and influences teams through crossover effects and social learning (Oc & Chintakananda, 2025).

Theoretical frameworks, including the conservation of resources (Hobfoll, 1989), broaden-and-build (Fredrickson, 2001), and affect the infusion (Forgas, 2007)), explain the bidirectional links between leader well-being and leadership behavior. Yet findings remain inconclusive: constructive leadership generally enhances leader well-being, but paradoxically may also increase emotional strain and risk of burnout.

To this end, our review addresses two central questions: (i) how has leader well-being been conceptualized and examined in the existing literature? (ii) what avenues for future research can be identified by critically evaluating current evidence and theoretical perspectives? This review contributes in two distinct ways. First, it advances theory by juxtaposing empirical findings with diverse explanatory models, revealing not only convergences but also tensions in how leader well-being is understood. Second, it establishes a forward-looking research agenda by identifying gaps and contradictions, thereby providing scholars with a roadmap to deepen inquiry into this complex and consequential phenomenon.

Leadership and Wellbeing

Leadership is broadly understood as the ability to inspire and enable others to contribute to organizational prosperity and effectiveness, or as the capacity to transform ideas into reality (Conger, 1999). Beyond shaping outcomes, leaders are also expected to cultivate responsible, health-conscious ways of working, which requires deep reflection and collective awareness (Lawson, 2024). Their role in creating environments where employees share knowledge, develop skills, and collaborate toward shared objectives is central to organizational performance.

Trust between leaders and followers has been shown to directly influence individual and team outcomes (Siyal et al., 2023). Leadership, therefore, is best understood as a process of motivating and guiding others toward common goals, achieved through support, inspiration, and confidence-building (Saputra, 2021). At the same time, leadership demands are resource-intensive, shaping not only organizational vision and innovation (Cortes & Herrmann, 2021) but also the well-being of leaders themselves. The emotional, cognitive, and psychosomatic strain inherent in leadership positions underscores that effective leadership depends not only on mobilizing followers but also on sustaining the leader's own well-being as a prerequisite for long-term organizational success.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a narrative literature review design, a method well-suited for synthesizing complex and diverse findings across disciplines such as psychology, organizational behavior, human resource management, and leadership literature (Vagvala et al., 2025). The narrative approach allows for flexibility in integrating theoretical and empirical insights from multiple domains, in contrast to systematic reviews that rely on rigid protocols and narrowly defined inclusion criteria (Mukherjee, 2025).

To ensure rigor and quality, the review focuses on peer-reviewed articles indexed in SCOPUS (Sreeja & Mukherjee, 2025). Reference lists of seminal studies were also examined to capture influential but less easily retrievable works. The search was limited to publications from 2015 to

2025, reflecting the recent surge of interest in leader well-being. Keywords and their combinations included: leader well-being, leadership well-being, leader health, leadership and mental health, occupational well-being, workplace well-being, and executive well-being. Non-English papers and studies not directly related to leadership or well-being were excluded.

RESULTS

The results below present a narrative synthesis of all studies included in this systematic review of leader well-being, structured around the five dimensions of the Van Horn et al. (2004) model: affective, cognitive, social, professional, and psychosomatic well-being.

Affective Well-Being

Affective well-being refers to the emotional states, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and emotional exhaustion that leaders experience in their roles (Van Horn et al., 2004). Role-related stress and emotional exhaustion are central threats, with Doyle Fosco (2022) showing that leaders, especially women, experience high stress from external pressures, managerial responsibilities, and family interactions, which often spill into home life. Women were more likely to engage in occupational self-care and seek social support, underscoring the need for tailored interventions. While mindfulness (Reb et al., 2014) and resilience coaching (Rosen et al., 2022) help reduce burnout, research still lacks clarity on which interventions are most effective across leadership levels and industries. Addressing this gap would guide practitioners in customizing well-being programs to leadership demographics and contexts, while providing scholars with comparative insights into intervention efficacy.

(Khan et al., 2022) further demonstrate that authentic leadership lowers emotional exhaustion through ego depletion, with authentic self-expression (Harter, 2002) and belonging acting as buffers. However, how contextual factors such as digital work environments reshape authenticity and belonging remains underexplored. This represents a research opportunity to understand digital-era leadership dynamics; insights would help practitioners craft inclusive hybrid-work policies and help academics build theories of authenticity in technologically mediated contexts.

Emotional labor also plays a critical role. Leaders often manage or mask true feelings to display organizationally expected emotions (Humphrey et al., 2015). Lee & Chelladurai (2018) found that emotional intelligence predicts whether leaders engage in surface acting, which increases burnout and reduces job satisfaction, or deep acting, which fosters positive outcomes. Maxwell & Riley (2016) confirmed that sustained surface acting elevates burnout risks, reinforcing the call for emotion regulation training. However, little is known about the long-term efficacy of such interventions or whether deep acting itself may have hidden costs when sustained over time. Closing this gap would allow leadership development practitioners to design programs that not only teach emotional regulation but also sustain its benefits, and academics could develop more nuanced theories about the double-edged nature of deep acting.

Relational climates serve as emotional buffers. (Yu & Chen, 2023) showed that trust in schools enhanced middle leaders' well-being and job performance, while leader-member exchange (LMX)- the quality of leader-follower relationships (Uhl-Bien, 2006)- was found to increase positive affect and competence (Richter-Killenberg & Volmer, 2022). These relational exchanges

replenish affective reserves, but Richter-Killenberg and Volmer emphasized the need for cross-cultural validation. More studies are needed to determine whether trust-building and high-quality LMX function similarly in organizations with flatter hierarchies, remote teams, or collectivist contexts. For practitioners, such insights could refine relational training and team-building programs, while for scholars, they would extend the generalizability of LMX theory across cultural settings.

Development pathways can also enhance affective well-being. Yemiscigil et al. (2022) found that programs fostering self-concept clarity and purpose improved leaders' emotional states; however, benefits faded over time, while S Jin et al. (2016) showed that affective organizational commitment was positively related to transformational leadership. These findings suggest booster sessions and peer coaching may sustain gains. However, little is known about the mechanisms driving the fade-out effect, or how interventions can be personalized to ensure durable impact. Clarifying these processes would allow practitioners to design interventions with sustained impact, while giving scholars opportunities to theorize the lifecycle of leadership development effects.

At the same time, leadership demands present paradoxes. Zwingmann et al., (2016) demonstrated that job demands and job control shape psychological health, with transformational leadership sometimes backfiring by increasing stress for leaders with high organization-based self-esteem. This paradox suggests the need for research on the boundary conditions under which inspirational leadership becomes draining, particularly in high-pressure organizational settings. For practitioners, such insights could prevent over-reliance on inspirational models in contexts where they may harm leader well-being, while for academics, they refine contingency-based leadership theory.

Personal and interpersonal resources further buffer stress. Shelton et al. (2022) and (Mencl et al., 2016) show that resilience, political skill, and effective work processes sustain affective well-being, while Bernerth (2022) noted that time management and cooperation moderate the impact of stress. However, most existing research has been cross-sectional; longitudinal approaches are needed to capture how resilience and skill-building evolve over time and how they interact with shifting organizational demands. Practitioners would benefit from knowing when to time resilience-building interventions for maximum effect, while scholars could trace how personal resources dynamically influence affective well-being.

Cognitive Well-Being

Cognitive well-being refers to the mental processes that allow leaders to sustain focus, process information, and make effective decisions in complex contexts (Van Horn et al., 2004). Cognitive strain often stems from how roles are structured. Li et al. (2018) showed that leadership role occupancy—juggling multiple responsibilities—affects well-being indirectly through job demands and control. Zheng et al. (2022) further noted that unclear follower expectations add to leaders' mental fatigue, while Doyle Fosco et al. (2023) highlighted how stress spills over to non-work life, especially for women. These studies stress that cognitive depletion is less an individual weakness than a product of poor role design. However, little is known about whether flexible job

designs or boundary-setting preserve cognitive bandwidth in the long term. Answering this would help practitioners redesign roles to protect leaders' focus and guide scholars in building theories of role clarity and cognitive sustainability.

Leadership styles also shape mental energy. Weiss et al. (2018) found that authentic leadership reduces stress by limiting ego depletion, while Khan et al. (2022) confirmed its value for women leaders. By contrast, transformational leadership can heighten stress and cognitive weariness, particularly among those with high organization-based self-esteem (Zwingmann et al., 2016). This paradox reveals that leadership styles may not universally enhance cognition; instead, effects vary with context and individual traits. More research is needed to determine which styles protect leaders' mental clarity under different job demands. Such insights could refine leadership development for practitioners and push academics toward more contingency-based leadership models.

Relational climates also influence cognitive strain. Yu & Chen (2023) showed that trust reduces the mental effort required to monitor others, while Richter-Killenberg & Volmer (2022) and Bernerth & Hirschfeld (2016) found that high-quality leader–member exchanges (LMX) enhance competence and reduce uncertainty. Yet, variations in LMX (differentiation) may create uneven stress patterns, raising questions about fairness in leader–follower relationships. Integrating subjective self-reports with objective measures could clarify how relational climates affect cognitive well-being. This would allow practitioners to design fairer relational practices and help scholars test how trust-based leadership models operate across contexts.

Resilience and development initiatives further shape cognitive recovery. Niinihuhta et al. (2022) found that programs that improve self-concept clarity and purpose yielded short-term gains but faded without reinforcement, suggesting the need for sustained interventions. Bernerth (2022) showed that work-process skills such as time management and cooperation buffered stress more than stable traits. Yet, limited evidence explains for whom such programs work best or how benefits can be maintained. Addressing this would help practitioners personalize resilience programs and provide academics with models of individual differences in program effectiveness. (Köppe et al., 2018) added that leaders' cognitive exhaustion can cross over to followers' health, showing that cognition is not just personal but relational. Future studies should examine these spillovers more systematically, helping practitioners anticipate team-level risks and scholars theorize the ripple effects of leader cognition.

Social well-being

Social well-being refers to the degree to which leaders experience a sense of belonging, trust, and constructive interpersonal ties at work (Van Horn et al., 2004). Khan et al. (2022) show that authentic leadership fosters belonging among women leaders, buffering against emotional exhaustion. This positions social well-being as an active resource, yet little is known about how other leadership styles, such as inclusive or servant leadership, shape belonging across diverse identity groups. Addressing this gap would enrich leadership theory and help practitioners design tailored interventions for underrepresented groups.

Beyond buffering exhaustion, it is unclear whether social well-being enhances outcomes like cognitive flexibility, ethical decision-making, or innovation. Exploring these pathways would extend theoretical models of sustainable leadership and guide practitioners in creating programs that cultivate relationally supportive leaders who drive innovation.

Little et al. (2016) highlight the role of leaders' interpersonal emotion management (IEM). Problem-focused IEM strategies, such as reframing stressors, foster trust and reciprocity, while suppression undermines relationships and reduces organizational citizenship. However, research remains silent on whether leaders themselves perceive reciprocal benefits in trust and cohesion. Understanding this would advance academic models of leader–follower reciprocity and inform practitioners on emotion management training that benefits both sides of the relationship.

Most studies treat social well-being at the dyadic level, overlooking team-level climates. Whether shared constructs like psychological safety or diversity climates bolster leaders' own sense of support is mainly unknown. Filling this gap would equip practitioners to foster team environments that protect both leader and follower well-being, offering a systemic approach rather than focusing solely on one-to-one ties.

Finally, as work becomes increasingly digital, leaders face risks of isolation and relational strain. Few studies address how virtual competencies, such as empathic digital communication, moderate these effects. Research in this area would guide academicians in updating well-being models for digital contexts and provide practitioners with strategies for sustaining cohesion in hybrid or remote workforces.

Professional Well-Being

Professional well-being, as outlined by Van Horn et al. (2004), captures leaders' sense of autonomy, competence, and aspiration, the meaning they derive from work, their perceived impact, and growth for opportunities. Professional well-being remains under-theorized as an integrated construct. Addressing this would strengthen conceptual clarity for academics while giving practitioners a more holistic framework for assessing leader development needs.

Autonomy is central to professional well-being, but no empirical work explores how governance practices, bureaucratic constraints, or crisis-driven centralization affect leaders' control over their roles. In increasingly complex, multi-stakeholder contexts, constrained autonomy could weaken motivation and innovation. Exploring these dynamics would enrich theoretical models of leader agency, while helping practitioners design roles and policies that balance accountability with the freedom leaders need to stay engaged and creative.

Leader–member exchanges (LMX) also influence leaders' sense of competence. Positive exchanges reinforce professional confidence, yet most LMX research focuses on followers, neglecting leaders themselves. Future work should examine how upward and lateral exchanges shape leaders' self-concept, and whether these effects differ by gender, tenure, or hierarchy. For scholars, this would broaden LMX theory to include leaders' perspectives, while for practitioners, it could guide the design of relationally supportive leadership teams that bolster competence across organizational levels.

Ambiguity and role overload further undermine professional well-being. Leaders often face conflicting expectations and time pressures, yet empirical studies treat role ambiguity only as a peripheral construct. Research could unpack distinct types of ambiguity—task, relational, or ethical—and trace how each uniquely affects satisfaction and effectiveness. Such findings would help academics refine stress and role theories, and enable organizations to craft clear role definitions, thereby reducing burnout and turnover among leaders.

Psychosomatic Well-Being

Psychosomatic well-being, as defined by Van Horn et al. (2004), captures the physical manifestations of psychological strain leaders face—such as fatigue, headaches, disrupted sleep, and chronic pain. The job demands-control model offers a useful lens here: leaders with little autonomy to delegate or adjust workloads are more likely to experience physiological strain, with decision fatigue spilling into their personal lives and undermining recovery. Yet, existing research rarely investigates how autonomy constraints in complex organizational structures specifically affect leaders' physical health. Exploring this link could help academics refine occupational health models while guiding practitioners in redesigning leadership roles to reduce physiological costs. Emotional labor further intensifies these effects. Leaders often suppress authentic feelings to maintain expected displays of composure, a pattern associated with heightened physiological arousal and burnout-like symptoms. Although well studied in frontline staff, leaders' experiences remain underexplored. Understanding how emotional regulation at senior levels translates into somatic strain would enrich theoretical accounts of leadership stress while informing practitioner training in healthier emotion management strategies.

Leadership style appears to moderate these outcomes. Authentic and transformational leaders report fewer psychosomatic complaints, possibly because of alignment between values and behaviors, whereas leaders in competitive or surveillance-driven environments show elevated physical strain. However, little is known about whether these protective effects hold across cultures, industries, or organizational sizes. Academics could test the generalizability of these relationships, and practitioners could use such insights to tailor leadership development to context rather than relying on generic style prescriptions.

Most evidence to date relies heavily on self-reported stress indicators, which capture only part of the picture. There is a need to integrate objective health measures such as cortisol, heart rate variability, and wearable-based sleep data to identify high-risk leadership contexts more accurately. Such work would advance methodological rigor for scholars and provide organizations with concrete tools for early detection and prevention of stress-related health decline in leaders.

Organizational norms also shape psychosomatic well-being. Cultures that emphasize urgency, constant availability, and blurred boundaries—especially in hybrid or global roles—can fragment rest and delay recovery. Yet systematic research into how these norms directly translate into leaders' physical symptoms is lacking. Filling this gap could help academics connect organizational climate with embodied outcomes, while offering practitioners evidence to support policies such as meeting-free hours, boundary-setting norms, and the right to disconnect.

Psychosomatic well-being reminds us that leadership stress is not merely psychological but embodied. Integrating objective health measures, examining context-specific dynamics, and foregrounding organizational climate in future studies will advance theory while equipping practitioners to design healthier leadership environments. Supporting leaders' physical health is inseparable from sustaining resilience, presence, and effectiveness at the top.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This review demonstrates that integrating leaders' well-being into leadership research enriches theory, guides practice, and advances broader societal goals. Its main contribution is extending Van Horn et al.'s (2004) framework by synthesizing evidence across affective, cognitive, social, professional, psychosomatic, and emerging digital dimensions. While prior scholarship often isolated constructs such as burnout, this synthesis highlights leader well-being as a dynamic, multi-dimensional resource shaped by systemic, organizational, and personal factors. By mapping how these dimensions intersect, the review refines theory, showing that well-being mechanisms are relational, contextual, and evolving rather than static. It builds the field by inviting scholars to adopt longitudinal and cross-cultural approaches, integrate subjective and objective indicators, and theorize how well-being processes operate differently across leaders, roles, and settings.

Practically, the findings underscore that leader well-being is a core organizational resource, not a private concern. Healthy leaders are more likely to sustain effective, relational leadership that benefits employees, teams, and the broader system (Richter-Killenberg & Volmer, 2022). Interventions such as tailored coaching, stress management, and supportive climates can buffer overload and exhaustion (Kaluza et al., 2019). Leaders can strengthen their impact by adopting authentic, relational practices that align with their own well-being. Practitioners, in turn, can use these insights to design evidence-based programs for increasingly digital, fast-paced environments.

At the societal level, prioritizing leaders' well-being supports healthier, more inclusive workplaces and directly contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals on health and decent work (SDG 3 and SDG 8). Leaders who are physically and mentally resilient are more likely to role model coping strategies, foster trust, and normalize openness around mental health (Wang et al., 2021). This study advances theory by positioning leader well-being as a multi-faceted, embedded construct central to leadership effectiveness. It contributes a framework for future research agendas and offers actionable guidance for organizations to create leadership pipelines that are both skilled and sustainable—strengthening workplaces and society alike.

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