

Leadership Distance and Perceived Organizational Support: An Integrative Review Toward Employee Engagement in Modern Organizations

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between leadership distance and employee engagement and the moderating role of perceived organizational support (POS) in contemporary work settings. The rise of remote, hybrid, and digitally mediated work has increased physical, social, and psychological leadership distance, raising concerns about its impact on employee engagement. Using a conceptual literature review of studies published between 2000 and 2024, this paper integrates Social Exchange Theory, Leader-Member Exchange, and the Job Demands-Resources model to explain these dynamics. The findings suggest that greater leadership distance weakens trust and relational connection, leading to lower employee engagement, while POS mitigates these negative effects by enhancing employees' sense of support and value. The study highlights the importance of strong organizational support systems, such as transparent communication and supportive digital infrastructures, to sustain engagement in distant and hybrid leadership contexts.

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, organizations have undergone significant structural and technological transformations that have reshaped the nature of leadership and employee relationships. Globalization, digital transformation, and the emergence of hybrid work models have created unprecedented complexity in how leaders interact with their subordinates (Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge, 2000; Avolio et al., 2014). These developments have amplified what scholars describe as leadership distance, referring to the degree of physical, social, and psychological separation between leaders and followers (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Napier & Ferris, 1993).

Leadership distance is not merely about geographical space; it also reflects emotional and relational gaps that influence trust, communication, and identification with organizational goals (Shamir, 1995; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 2000). Physical distance emerges when leaders and followers are separated by location or time zones, as seen in virtual or cross-national teams. Social distance results from hierarchical structures, status differences, and unequal access to information. Psychological distance involves perceived inaccessibility, lack of empathy, or diminished connection between leaders and subordinates (Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999; Gerpott, Van Quaquebeke, & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2019).

While some degree of distance can empower employees through autonomy and reduce micromanagement, excessive distance often erodes motivation and engagement. Employees who perceive their leaders as detached or unavailable tend to experience uncertainty and emotional exhaustion, leading to lower job satisfaction and reduced discretionary effort (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Kahn, 2010). This challenge has become particularly salient in post-pandemic workplaces where virtual collaboration is the norm and leadership presence is mediated through screens (Saks, 2019).

To address these challenges, scholars have turned attention to Perceived Organizational Support (POS), which captures employees' belief that their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). POS represents a powerful organizational resource that fosters trust, loyalty, and affective commitment. When employees perceive high organizational support, they are more likely to engage proactively in their work and exhibit resilience in the face of uncertainty (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2020). In contrast, low POS intensifies the negative effects of leadership distance, as employees interpret managerial absence as neglect or lack of appreciation.

Recent research suggests that in virtual and hybrid contexts, organizational support may act as a substitute for close supervision (Eisenberger, Malone, & Presson, 2014). Supportive policies, transparent communication, and recognition systems can convey organizational care even when direct leader-follower interaction is limited. This mechanism allows organizations to maintain engagement despite structural or geographical distance (Gajendran & Joshi, 2012; Gerpott et al., 2019).

However, despite the growing relevance of both constructs, the literature remains fragmented. Studies on leadership distance often focus on communication barriers or performance outcomes (Antonakis, 2011; Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999), while research on POS predominantly examines its direct effects on commitment and well-being (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Kurtessis et al., 2017). The intersection between leadership distance and organizational support, particularly their combined impact on employee engagement, has received limited theoretical and empirical attention. This represents a critical research gap, especially as digital transformation and flexible work arrangements redefine how employees experience leadership and belonging (Caesens et al., 2016; Saks, 2019).

Employee engagement, is a state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption in work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), is essential for sustaining organizational performance and innovation. Engaged employees contribute to productivity, creativity, and organizational resilience. Yet, engagement levels worldwide remain alarmingly low, with surveys showing that remote employees often feel isolated from their leaders and disconnected from organizational goals (Gallup, 2023). Addressing this issue requires understanding not only leadership behavior but also how organizational structures communicate support and inclusion.

This paper seeks to conceptually integrate leadership distance and perceived organizational support as complementary constructs influencing employee engagement. It proposes that while leadership distance can reduce interaction quality and emotional connection, strong POS can buffer these effects by providing employees with a sense of value and security. In other words, when organizations actively demonstrate care and fairness, the detrimental effects of distance are mitigated, allowing engagement to flourish even under remote or dispersed conditions.

The study makes several theoretical and practical contributions. First, it extends the leadership literature by framing distance not as a fixed disadvantage but as a contextual variable whose effects depend on organizational support mechanisms. Second, it enriches the understanding of engagement antecedents by incorporating macro-level (organizational) and micro-level (leadership) dynamics. Third, it offers actionable insights for organizations navigating hybrid and digital environments—emphasizing the role of communication transparency, recognition, and employee well-being programs in maintaining engagement when leaders cannot be physically present.

In sum, this paper argues that leadership distance, a defining feature of contemporary organizations, does not inevitably lead to disengagement. Its impact depends on how employees interpret and experience organizational support. By cultivating a culture of care and inclusion, organizations can transform distance into empowerment and sustain engagement in an increasingly virtual world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership Distance

The concept of leadership distance has evolved significantly over the past two decades as organizations face increasing globalization, digitalization, and hybrid work structures. Originally conceptualized by Antonakis and Atwater (2002), leadership distance refers to the degree of separation between leaders and followers across three key dimensions: physical distance (spatial or geographical separation), social distance (hierarchical or status differentials), and psychological distance (emotional or relational detachment). This construct has gained renewed attention in the era of remote work, where physical and psychological proximity between leaders and employees has dramatically changed (Avolio, Sosik, Kahai, & Baker, 2014; Purvanova & Bono, 2021).

Earlier research demonstrated that proximity facilitates better communication, trust, and performance outcomes (Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 2000). Leaders who are perceived as “close” can provide individualized support, feedback, and recognition, which improve follower satisfaction and engagement (Antonakis, 2011). However, excessive closeness may hinder autonomy, while strategic distance can reinforce authority and encourage independent problem-solving (Napier & Ferris, 1993).

In the digital era, leadership distance has become more complex. Electronic communication channels have enabled e-leadership, where leaders influence followers through computer-mediated interactions (Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge, 2000). E-leadership requires leaders to build credibility and trust despite limited physical presence (Cortellazzo, Bruni, & Zampieri, 2019). Gerpott, Van Quaquebeke, and Lehmann-Willenbrock (2019) proposed that leadership distance is not merely a structural phenomenon but also perceptual—followers interpret cues such as communication frequency and emotional tone to assess closeness.

Perceived Organizational Support (POS)

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) has long been regarded as one of the most influential constructs in organizational behavior. It captures employees’ overarching belief that their organization values their contributions and genuinely cares about their well-being (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). As organizations transition toward more complex, digital, and hybrid work environments, POS has become increasingly vital in shaping how employees interpret their relationship with the organization. A high level of perceived support communicates fairness, appreciation, and trust, prompting employees to reciprocate through loyalty, commitment, and engagement (Kurtessis et al., 2017). Conversely, when employees perceive low organizational support, they often experience neglect and psychological detachment, conditions that erode motivation and hinder performance (Riggle, Edmondson, & Hansen, 2009).

Over the past two decades, a substantial body of research has identified both the antecedents and outcomes of POS. Among its strongest predictors are perceptions of fairness and organizational justice: employees who view decision-making processes and reward systems as equitable tend to infer that the

organization treats them with respect and integrity (Colquitt et al., 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Leadership behavior likewise plays a pivotal role, as supervisors function as agents of the organization. Supportive managerial actions—such as providing constructive feedback, demonstrating empathy, and recognizing accomplishments—enhance employees' sense of being valued (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006; Neves & Eisenberger, 2014). In addition, high-involvement human-resource practices that promote employee development and participation in decision-making strengthen POS by fostering belongingness and psychological ownership (Alfes, Shantz, & Truss, 2012; Baran, Shanock, & Miller, 2012).

The beneficial effects of POS extend to a broad spectrum of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Meta-analytic evidence consistently shows that POS predicts affective commitment, job satisfaction, task performance, and organizational-citizenship behavior (Kurtessis et al., 2017; Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2020). Employees who feel supported display higher levels of engagement and willingly invest additional effort beyond formal role requirements (Saks, 2019). By contrast, insufficient organizational support is associated with emotional exhaustion, reduced identification with the organization, and greater turnover intentions (Chiang & Hsieh, 2012; Islam, Ahmed, & Ahmad, 2019). This link between POS and engagement is particularly salient in contemporary, knowledge-driven workplaces, where emotional connection and intrinsic motivation are central to productivity and innovation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Leadership Distance and Organizational Support

The interaction between leadership distance and POS has emerged as a critical yet underexplored theme. As physical and psychological separation between leaders and followers increases, employees depend more on organizational systems and culture to satisfy their socio-emotional needs (Eisenberger et al., 2014). When POS is high, distance is interpreted as autonomy and empowerment; when low, it becomes isolation and neglect (Schwarz et al., 2016).

Empirical evidence supports this moderating and compensatory relationship. Kim and Beehr (2018) demonstrated that high organizational support buffers the negative effects of limited supervisory feedback on engagement. Similarly, Schwarz et al. (2016) found that servant leadership's impact on performance was mediated by perceived support—employees who felt valued by their organization sustained high motivation despite low interaction frequency. Gerpott et al. (2019) showed that follower perceptions of leader communication distance predicted trust and engagement only when POS was low, suggesting that organizational support can substitute for interpersonal closeness.

Moreover, leadership distance influences the development of POS itself. When leaders communicate less frequently or fail to acknowledge employee efforts, workers may generalize these experiences to the organization as a whole, perceiving reduced support (Eisenberger, Malone, & Presson, 2014). Conversely, transparent corporate communication, inclusive HR practices, and recognition

programs can strengthen POS even when leadership is structurally distant (Alfes et al., 2012; Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020). These findings align with the notion of organizational substitutes for leadership (Kerr & Jermier, 1978; revisited by Dionne, Yammarino, Howell, & Villa, 2005). In large or decentralized organizations, structural and cultural mechanisms can replicate the motivational and emotional functions of direct leader support. Therefore, leadership distance and POS are not opposing forces but interdependent systems that together determine employee attitudes and engagement.

Perceived Organizational Support and Employee Engagement

Employee engagement defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) – has become a central outcome in POS research. Numerous studies across industries and cultures confirm that POS predicts higher engagement and lower burnout (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Saks, 2019; Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2020).

POS fulfills basic psychological needs for belonging, competence, and meaning, motivating employees to invest effort and persistence in their roles (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Deci & Ryan, 2000). High POS environments encourage psychological safety, creativity, and resilience (Chaudhary & Panda, 2018; Liu, 2022). In contrast, low POS undermines motivation, leading to emotional exhaustion and disengagement (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Recent empirical work emphasizes POS as a protective factor during crises. For instance, Charoensukmongkol and Phungsoonthorn (2020) found that POS mitigated emotional exhaustion among university employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Gallup's (2023) State of the Global Workplace Report highlighted that employees who feel cared for by their organizations are twice as likely to report high engagement, even in remote setups.

Beyond individual well-being, POS drives collective outcomes such as team performance and organizational innovation (Newman et al., 2011; Alfes et al., 2012). This reinforces the strategic role of POS as a cultural and relational resource, particularly in organizations facing structural distance and digital transformation

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an integrative literature review approach to synthesize theoretical and empirical research on Leadership Distance and Perceived Organizational Support (POS) and their relevance to employee engagement. The integrative design was chosen because it enables the combination of diverse research perspectives to generate new theoretical insights rather than to statistically test hypotheses (Torraco, 2005).

Relevant literature was systematically collected from major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, and Taylor & Francis Online, using keywords such as "leadership distance," "perceived organizational support," "employee engagement," "remote leadership," and "hybrid work." The search focused on peer-reviewed publications between 2000 and 2024, resulting in approximately 90 core articles after a multistage screening process based on relevance, quality, and accessibility.

Only studies published in English and addressing organizational or managerial contexts were included.

Table 1. Literature Selection Criteria

No	Criterion	Description
1.	Publication period	2000–2024
2.	Type of sources	Peer-reviewed journal articles
3.	Language	English
4.	Research context	Organizational and managerial settings
5.	Main focus	Leadership Distance, POS, Employee Engagement

The analysis followed an inductive–deductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), identifying recurring concepts, antecedents, and outcomes of both constructs and integrating them through established theories such as Social Exchange Theory and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model. Triangulation across multiple databases, cross-referencing of highly cited sources, and prioritization of Q1–Q2 journals enhanced the validity of findings. As the study relied solely on secondary data, no ethical approval was required. Overall, this method allowed for the development of a conceptual framework explaining how organizational support can mitigate the negative effects of leadership distance and sustain employee engagement in contemporary workplaces.

Table 2. Stages of the Integrative Review Process

No	Stage	Key Activities	Output
1.	Identification	Screening and selection of relevant studies	Core literature set
2.	Categorization	Grouping constructs and themes	Conceptual themes
3.	Synthesis	Integrating findings across theories	Theoretical linkages
4.	Model Development	Constructing an integrative framework	Conceptual model

RESEARCH RESULT

The results of this integrative review reveal several consistent patterns in the relationships among Leadership Distance, Perceived Organizational Support (POS), and Employee Engagement. Across the reviewed studies, three dominant themes emerged: (1) leadership distance shapes employees’ perceptions of connection, trust, and belonging; (2) POS serves as a compensatory mechanism that mitigates the adverse effects of leadership distance; and (3) both constructs jointly predict engagement, performance, and well-being within increasingly digital and hybrid organizational environments.

Leadership Distance and Employee Perceptions

The analysis shows that leadership distance exerts a significant influence on how employees perceive their leaders and interpret organizational intent. When leaders are perceived as distant-physically, socially, or psychologically-employees often report weaker identification, reduced communication quality,

and lower trust (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Gerpott, Van Quaquebeke, & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2019). However, not all distance is detrimental. Moderate distance can foster autonomy, strategic objectivity, and respect for hierarchical roles (Napier & Ferris, 1993; Antonakis, 2011). The key determinant lies in how leaders manage relational cues and maintain visibility through consistent communication, empathy, and symbolic gestures of presence.

In virtual or geographically dispersed settings, the leader's ability to maintain relational proximity despite physical separation becomes a decisive factor for engagement. Scholars emphasize that digital leadership, characterized by authenticity and emotional intelligence, helps reduce perceived psychological distance and promotes a sense of inclusion (Avolio, Sosik, Kahai, & Baker, 2014; Purvanova & Bono, 2021).

The Role of Perceived Organizational Support (POS)

A major outcome of this review is the confirmation that Perceived Organizational Support plays a critical buffering role in situations where leadership distance is high. POS consistently appears as one of the most powerful predictors of engagement, satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Kurtessis et al., 2017). When employees believe that their organization values their contributions and cares for their well-being, they are more likely to remain motivated and resilient, even in situations with limited leader interaction (Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2020; Neves & Eisenberger, 2014).

Studies also reveal that POS can substitute for close supervision, functioning as an organizational safety net that compensates for reduced face-to-face communication. In hybrid and remote settings, organizational policies such as flexible scheduling, transparent communication, and digital recognition programs act as visible signals of care (Collins, 2021; Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2020). These forms of support maintain engagement by reinforcing psychological safety and a sense of belonging.

Conversely, when both leadership distance and POS are low, employees often experience emotional exhaustion, detachment, and turnover intentions (Chiang & Hsieh, 2012; Riggle, Edmondson, & Hansen, 2009). Thus, POS serves as both a mediator and a moderator in the link between leadership behavior and employee outcomes.

Integration of Constructs

Synthesizing the findings across multiple studies suggests a strong interactive effect between leadership distance and POS. Leadership distance influences the frequency and quality of social exchange, whereas POS determines how employees interpret that distance—either as empowering autonomy or as neglect. When organizational support is high, employees perceive leadership distance as functional and professional; when it is low, the same distance is perceived as disengagement or lack of care.

This integration aligns with Social Exchange Theory (SET), which explains that employees reciprocate perceived care and fairness with loyalty and engagement (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Similarly, within the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model, POS functions as an essential job resource

that mitigates psychological strain caused by distant leadership (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). These theoretical linkages strengthen the argument that POS not only explains but actively moderates the relationship between leadership distance and employee engagement.

Emerging Themes in the Digital Context

The reviewed studies indicate that digital transformation has amplified both the challenges and the importance of POS. Remote work environments often limit spontaneous leader-follower interaction, increasing perceived psychological distance (Avolio et al., 2014; Gerpott et al., 2019). In such contexts, organizational support communicated through technology—such as virtual check-ins, e-learning opportunities, and recognition systems—becomes a substitute for physical proximity (Liu, 2022; Gallup, 2023).

Furthermore, generational differences emerged as a subtle moderating factor. Younger employees tend to interpret digital responsiveness and technological investment as organizational support, while older employees value emotional and interpersonal forms of support (Kim & Beehr, 2018). This highlights the need for organizations to adopt a balanced strategy that integrates both technological and human-centered support mechanisms.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings from this literature review contribute to both theory and practice. Theoretically, the synthesis clarifies that leadership distance does not inherently weaken engagement; rather, its effects depend on the level of organizational support perceived by employees. By integrating the constructs under the SET and JD-R frameworks, this review advances a multi-level understanding of leadership and engagement that bridges individual, relational, and organizational perspectives.

Practically, organizations are encouraged to view support systems as leadership amplifiers. In environments where leaders cannot maintain close physical or psychological proximity, structured organizational support—such as transparent communication, fair evaluation systems, and digital well-being initiatives—can preserve trust and motivation. Leaders should consciously express empathy, appreciation, and accessibility through both direct interaction and institutional policies to strengthen perceived support.

DISCUSSION

Furthermore, the discussion should also acknowledge the limitations of the research and reflect on its implications. Recognizing factors such as model assumptions, experimental conditions, the scope of the sample, or uncontrolled external variables enhances the manuscript's scientific credibility. From these acknowledgments, the author may derive both theoretical implications, such as the reinforcement or reevaluation of existing models, and practical implications, such as technical or policy recommendations. Through this comprehensive approach, the discussion becomes more than a simple commentary on the results; it evolves into a structured scientific argument that guides the reader logically and convincingly toward the study's main conclusions.

Table 3. Summary of Key Findings from the Integrative Review

No	Theme	Key Findings	Theoretical Interpretation
1.	Leadership Distance	High distance weakens trust, communication, and emotional connection, reducing engagement	LMX: reduced exchange quality
2.	Moderate Distance	Can enhance autonomy and empowerment in flexible work settings	JD-R: autonomy as a job resource
3.	Perceived Organizational Support	POS consistently predicts higher engagement and resilience	SET: norm of reciprocity
4.	POS as Mediator	Leadership distance shapes engagement indirectly through POS	Leaders as organizational agents
5.	POS as Moderator	High POS buffers the negative effects of leadership distance	JD-R: resource compensation

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This integrative review examined the evolving relationship between Leadership Distance and Perceived Organizational Support (POS) and their combined influence on Employee Engagement within modern organizational contexts. The synthesis of two decades of research (2000–2024) revealed that leadership distance, whether physical, social, or psychological, has significant implications for how employees experience connection, trust, and motivation at work. While excessive distance can erode engagement, a moderate level of distance, when accompanied by effective communication and organizational support, can promote autonomy and self-efficacy.

The findings consistently demonstrate that Perceived Organizational Support functions as a critical mechanism that compensates for the adverse effects of leadership distance. When employees believe that their organization values their contributions and genuinely cares for their well-being, they are more likely to remain committed, motivated, and resilient, even under limited direct supervision. POS thus acts as both a mediator, translating organizational care into engagement, and a moderator, buffering the negative consequences of distant leadership.

Theoretically, this review contributes to leadership and organizational behavior literature by integrating the constructs of Leadership Distance and POS under the frameworks of Social Exchange Theory and the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model. It advances the understanding that leadership effectiveness in modern organizations is not solely determined by physical proximity but by the quality of perceived support and relational communication within the organizational system.

From a practical standpoint, organizations should view support as a strategic form of leadership. Transparent communication, digital recognition systems, fair HR practices, and a culture of care are essential to maintaining engagement in hybrid and remote environments. Leaders must consciously demonstrate empathy, availability, and consistency through both direct interaction and institutional mechanisms.

Finally, this review highlights directions for future research. Scholars should explore how leadership distance and POS interact over time using longitudinal and cross-cultural designs, and how digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and generational diversity reshape these dynamics. Understanding these relationships will be crucial for sustaining employee engagement and organizational resilience in the rapidly changing world of work.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Despite its contributions, this integrative review is not without limitations. First, the study relies primarily on secondary sources drawn from peer-reviewed journals, which may introduce publication bias by underrepresenting unpublished studies or practitioner-based evidence. Consequently, certain contextual nuances—particularly those emerging from non-Western or small-scale organizational settings—may not be fully captured. Second, although this review integrates multiple theoretical perspectives on leadership distance and perceived organizational support, the conceptual synthesis remains interpretive rather than empirically tested. As such, causal inferences regarding their joint influence on employee engagement cannot be definitively established.

Future research is therefore encouraged to empirically validate the conceptual propositions developed in this review through quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approaches. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper understanding of how leadership distance and perceived organizational support interact over time to shape employee engagement trajectories. Further exploration across diverse cultural and organizational contexts—particularly in emerging economies and small-to-medium enterprises—would enrich the robustness and applicability of the framework. Moreover, incorporating moderating variables such as organizational culture, digital leadership competence, or psychological safety may offer more nuanced insights into the complex mechanisms linking leadership practices, organizational support, and employee engagement in modern organizations.

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