



# Ubuntu leadership as a predictor of employee engagement: A South African study



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## Dates:

Received: 09 Oct. 2023

Accepted: 14 Feb. 2024

Published: 21 Mar. 2024

## How to cite this article:

Chetty, K., & Price, G. (2024).  
Ubuntu leadership as a  
predictor of employee  
engagement: A South African  
study. *SA Journal of Human  
Resource Management/SA  
Tydskrif vir  
Menslikehulpbronbestuur*,  
22(0), a2462. [https://doi.  
org/10.4102/sajhrm.  
v22i0.2462](https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v22i0.2462)

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**Orientation:** Ubuntu leadership is increasingly being promoted as a suitable leadership philosophy for South African workplaces, necessitating further exploration of its application and outcomes.

**Research purpose:** This study thus investigates Ubuntu leadership as a predictor of employee engagement (EE) in the South African context, considering ethnicity, age and tenure as moderating variables.

**Motivation for the study:** The necessity to study perceptions of Ubuntu leadership and its influence of EE lies in the need to understand how this culturally rooted leadership style can enhance organisational performance, employee well-being and inclusivity in diverse workplaces.

**Research approach/design and method:** The study adhered to a positivist philosophical perspective, employing a descriptive research design with a quantitative approach. Data were collected from 193 South African participants through a self-administered online questionnaire.

**Main findings:** The study findings indicated that the practice of Ubuntu leadership, as perceived by employees, significantly predicted EE.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Organisational leaders and managers hold a crucial role in shaping the workplace environment, and their acknowledgment of Ubuntu leadership's fundamental principles, such as fostering authentic relationships, empathy, collaboration and respect, has the potential to boost EE.

**Contribution/value-add:** The research outcomes offer valuable insights into how Ubuntu leadership can enhance EE and provide proactive measures for its implementation.

**Keywords:** Ubuntu leadership; employee engagement; organisational culture; respect; collaboration; empathy.

## Introduction

In recent years, Ubuntu, a philosophy rooted in African culture, has been applied to leadership (Mupedziswa et al., 2019). In Xhosa, Ubuntu means 'humanity toward others', emphasising interconnectedness, respect and the importance of community (Metz, 2021). Mutwarasibo and Iken (2019) describe Ubuntu leadership as a way of leading that prioritises the wellbeing of all stakeholders and creates a sense of community and belonging. Increasingly, many leaders are adopting the Ubuntu philosophy of leadership to create a more inclusive, empathic workplace (Adeleye et al., 2020).

It is critical for leaders to create a work environment that fosters employee engagement (EE) for their organisations to succeed (Jiang & Men, 2017). A sense of community and belonging created by Ubuntu leadership leads to EE and job satisfaction (Tauetsile, 2021). A company with engaged employees is more likely to achieve its goals, be more productive and be more committed to its work (Saks, 2006).

According to Mutwarasibo and Iken (2019), relationships are one of Ubuntu leadership's key foci. Developing strong relationships with employees, customers and other stakeholders is a high priority in an Ubuntu-led environment (Woermann & Engelbrecht, 2019). Employee engagement is enhanced when relationships are prioritised, as it creates a sense of belonging (Randel et al., 2018).

Empathy is another key principle of Ubuntu leadership (wa Mungai, 2021). A company's leaders recognise the importance of understanding employees' perspectives and needs, and they strive to create an empathic and supportive work environment (Gerpott et al., 2020). As a result of

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empathising with employees, job satisfaction and commitment to the organisation are increased, which is essential for EE (Mangaliso et al., 2018; Poovan et al., 2006).

Furthermore, as emphasised by Van Norren and Beehner (2021), Ubuntu leadership underscores the significance of collaboration and respect. Within an Ubuntu environment, leadership encourages open communication, mutual support, inclusivity and the exchange of ideas between leaders and their employees, as noted by Obiekwe et al. (2019) and Tauetsile (2021). Ubuntu leaders actively listen to others, valuing their perspectives and ensuring that every voice is heard and respected. This culture of collaboration and respect has a direct impact on employee satisfaction and commitment to the organisation, ultimately contributing to heightened levels of engagement, as observed by Chanana and Sangeeta (2021).

However, despite its many benefits, Ubuntu leadership can also present challenges and shortcomings. Firstly, South Africans of African descent have a conflicted relationship with Ubuntu (Gade, 2012; Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2016). Secondly, balancing employees' needs with the needs of the organisation. Occasionally, leaders in Ubuntu leadership environments make decisions that benefit the group, even if they are not in the best interests of every single employee (Resane, 2022). The needs of the individual and the needs of the organisation could conflict as a result.

Lastly, the possibility of misinterpreting or misapplying its principles. Mutwarasibo and Iken (2019) contend that people with different cultural backgrounds may find it difficult to understand or apply Ubuntu philosophy. A superficial or performative approach to Ubuntu leadership may not produce the desired results when it comes to improving EE and organisational success. Leadership styles such as Ubuntu have been found to positively impact EE, making it increasingly important for leaders to understand how to apply these principles in their own organisations (Muller et al., 2019).

## Research purpose and objectives

This study aims to provide valuable insights into the potential benefits and challenges of implementing Ubuntu leadership in the workplace by inquiry into the following objectives:

- How do employees perceive Ubuntu leadership in their workplace?
- To what extent do employees' perceptions of Ubuntu leadership influence their engagement?
- Do ethnicity, age and the number of years employed in organisations moderate the relationship between Ubuntu leadership, as perceived by employees, and EE?

## Literature review

In contemporary organisational paradigms, leadership has emerged as a critical determinant of organisational success

and EE (Inceoglu et al., 2018; Weiss et al., 2018). Amid the plethora of leadership theories, the Ubuntu leadership framework stands out. In Ubuntu leadership, relationships, empathy, collaboration and respect are key principles (wa Mungai, 2021).

## Employee engagement

The concept of EE is strongly associated with organisations' success and employees' well-being (Turner, 2020). Individuals invest their physical, emotional and cognitive energies into their roles, building a deep connection with the organisation and its objectives (Bakker & Leiter, 2017). Employee engagement surpasses mere job satisfaction by encapsulating a holistic alignment between individual aspirations and organisational objectives (Bailey et al., 2017). Its essence is articulated in three interwoven dimensions:

### Vigour

At the core of engagement lies an emotional bond employees cultivate with their work and organisation (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017). This dimension encapsulates feelings of enthusiasm, passion and pride (PratimaSarangi & Nayak, 2018). Engaged employees experience a deep emotional resonance with their roles, contributing to a sense of commitment that transcends the routine demands of the job (Das & Ramaswamy, 2022).

### Absorption

This dimension reflects an employee's understanding of the significance of their role within the larger organisational context (Imran et al., 2020; Mone et al., 2018). Engaged individuals perceive their contributions as meaningful and comprehend how their efforts contribute to the overall success of the organisation (Lysova et al., 2019). This understanding imbues their work with purpose and significance (Martela & Pessi, 2018).

### Dedication

Dedication is characterised by the discretionary efforts employees willingly invest in their roles (Sharafizad et al., 2020). Engaged employees exhibit proactive behaviours, extending beyond their prescribed tasks to contribute positively to team dynamics and organisational outcomes (Wang et al., 2017). This dimension manifests itself in a willingness to expend extra effort and contribute novel ideas (Green et al., 2017).

## Alignment of Ubuntu leadership with employee engagement

Ubuntu leadership aligns seamlessly with the dimensions of EE, enriching the individual's connection to their work and organisation (Muller et al., 2019; Ngcobo, 2018; Reddy, 2018; Tauetsile, 2021). The strong focus on relationships engenders a sense of belongingness and emotional attachment, contributing to the vigour dimension of engagement (Hoffmann & Metz, 2017). Empathy enhances the absorption

dimension of engagement by catering to employees' intrinsic motivations and psychological needs (Singh, 2014). Lastly, collaboration not only increases involvement in tasks but also creates a sense of ownership, aligning with the dedication dimension of engagement (Jassawalla & Sashittal, 1999). There is a synergistic relationship between Ubuntu leadership principles and EE. This connection highlights Ubuntu leadership's potential to be a catalyst in developing a harmonious, participatory and engaged workforce. The above discussion leads to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Perceptions of Ubuntu leadership influence EE in the workplace.

## Principles of Ubuntu leadership

At its foundation, Ubuntu leadership encapsulates the ethos of collectivism, recognising that an individual's growth and well-being are inextricably tied to the welfare of the community (Asamoah & Yeboah-Assiamah, 2019; Setlhodi, 2019). According to Resane (2022), Ubuntu highlights human interconnectedness and social harmony. Ubuntu leaders, guided by this philosophy, prioritise the establishment of strong interpersonal relationships that transcend hierarchical boundaries (Adeleye et al., 2020). The nurturing of such relationships facilitates open communication, trust and a sense of belonging, which helps to create a conducive environment for EE (Jiang & Men, 2017).

### Solidarity

Ubuntu leadership values the importance of solidarity, where individuals within the community support one another despite their differences (Msila, 2008). Solidarity in this context is not just a theoretical concept but a lived experience, where leaders actively develop a sense of unity and interconnectedness. During challenging times, Ubuntu leaders encourage team members to lean on one another for support, creating a safety net that promotes emotional well-being and collective strength (Mangalsio et al., 2018). This sense of solidarity enhances the resilience of the community. It reinforces the idea that the success of each individual is intertwined with the success of the whole. By promoting solidarity, Ubuntu leaders cultivate a culture of trust, loyalty and shared sense of purpose.

### Survival

Survival in Ubuntu leadership extends beyond mere existence; it involves thriving and flourishing as a collective (Hailey, 2008). Ubuntu leaders recognise that the survival of the community is not guaranteed solely by individual achievements but by the ability of the collective to adapt, innovate and overcome challenges together (Poovan et al., 2016).

Ubuntu leaders strive towards an environment that encourages continuous learning, adaptability and resilience (Mangaliso et al., 2018). They understand that in the ever-changing professional world, survival requires proactive

approaches to challenges and ongoing development. This principle is rooted in the understanding that the collective survival of the community depends on the individual and collective capacity to navigate uncertainties and evolve.

## Relationships

Ubuntu leadership places relationships at the forefront of its principles (Mutwarasibo & Iken, 2019). Leaders who embrace Ubuntu actively maintain connections with their team members, providing an atmosphere of inclusivity and mutual support (Tauetsile, 2021). Relationships enhance cooperation and encourage a feeling of community, thereby reinforcing the perception that employees' contributions are valued (Cardiff et al., 2020).

## Empathy

In Ubuntu leadership, empathy is a fundamental principle (wa Mungai, 2021). Leaders who practice empathy demonstrate a genuine understanding of their employees' needs, concerns and perspectives (Gerpott et al., 2020). This empathetic approach facilitates emotional resonance and promotes a workplace culture where individuals feel acknowledged and supported, contributing to increased EE (Muchiri, 2011).

## Collaboration

Ubuntu leaders enable collaboration through the dismantling of hierarchical barriers and the encouragement of ideas and skills (Van Norren & Beehner, 2021). By creating an environment that values diverse contributions and promotes collective problem-solving, collaboration becomes an essential driver of EE (Obiekwe et al., 2019).

## Respect

In Ubuntu leadership, respect is highly valued (Tladi, 2021). It is more than just a matter of superficial courtesy. Individuals are valued for their inherent worth and embodied in a deep sense of interconnectedness. In the Ubuntu philosophy, respect takes shape through active listening, inclusivity and empathy as noted by Obiekwe et al. (2019). Ubuntu leaders actively listen to others, valuing their perspectives and ensuring every voice is heard and respected (Roper & Clarke, 2020). Ubuntu leaders prioritise inclusivity (Nzimakwe, 2014), making sure all members of the community or organisation feel valued and appreciated, no matter their background.

Moreover, respect within Ubuntu leadership extends to conflict resolution, cultural sensitivity and ethical conduct (Aiyedun & Ordor, 2016). Leaders aim to resolve conflicts while preserving all parties' dignity, appreciate and celebrate cultural diversity, and model ethical behaviour through principles of fairness and integrity. Respect is the cornerstone of Ubuntu leadership. This results in a cohesive organisational culture where individuals feel valued, heard and motivated to contribute their best efforts.

## Exploring the relationship: Ubuntu leadership and employee engagement

An employee-orientated form of leadership has been demonstrated to enhance EE (Othman et al., 2017). As such, a growing body of empirical research has sought to investigate the intricate connection between Ubuntu leadership principles and EE (Muller et al., 2019; Reddy, 2018; Tauetsile, 2021). Some of these studies have used mixed-method approaches, encompassing qualitative interviews, surveys, and quantitative analyses to discern the nature and magnitude of this relationship. These scholars have examined how Ubuntu leadership practices resonate with employees and contribute to shaping engagement dynamics within diverse organisational contexts.

### Ubuntu leadership's positive impact on employee engagement

Research consistently demonstrates the significant impact of Ubuntu leadership on various dimensions of EE (Muller et al., 2019). This ultimately contributes to a thriving work environment and organisational success. These positive outcomes encompass increased job satisfaction, heightened commitment, improved performance, a nurturing organisational culture and reduced turnover intentions.

Job satisfaction among employees is consistently positively correlated with Ubuntu leadership (Mangaliso et al., 2018). Ubuntu leadership places a strong value on strengthening genuine relationships among team members through empathetic connections. Employees experience a deep sense of belonging and fulfilment, increasing their overall job satisfaction (Randel et al., 2018).

Further, Ubuntu leadership's focus on collaborative decision-making and inclusive communication engenders a shared sense of ownership and commitment among employees (Poovan et al., 2006). When employees perceive their contributions as valued and integral to organisation progress, commitment levels naturally increase (Saks, 2006). In terms of performance, research consistently reveals a positive correlation between Ubuntu leadership practices and enhanced employee performance (Tauetsile, 2021). Ubuntu principles create collaborative work environments that facilitate knowledge sharing, innovation and collective problem-solving, boosting overall task performance (Mutwarasibo & Iken, 2019).

Ubuntu leadership also significantly contributes to shaping a positive organisational culture characterised by trust, respect and mutual support (Hailey, 2008). Creating such a nurturing environment encourages employees to become active participants in their work roles, leading to increased engagement (Javed et al., 2019). As employees feel valued and supported, they contribute to a healthy and vibrant organisational culture. Additionally, Ubuntu leadership principles have been linked to reduced turnover intentions among employees (Chigangaidze et al., 2022). Engaged

employees, nurtured through Ubuntu leadership practices, are less likely to seek alternative job opportunities because of their heightened sense of attachment and satisfaction within the organisation (Muller et al., 2019).

It is evident that Ubuntu leadership has an impact on EE through increased levels of the above-mentioned characteristics. These findings underscore the significance of Ubuntu leadership in creating a workplace where employees feel motivated to achieve succeeding levels of performance.

## Moderating factors

### Ethnicity

Ethnicity, with its intricate interplay of cultural norms, values and identity, can moderate the Ubuntu leadership and EE relationship (Zhu et al., 2009). Similarly, the ethnicity of the leader and their followers has been found to interact with follower satisfaction (Chong & Thomas, 1997). The authors thus argue that the cultural lens through which Ubuntu principles are interpreted and enacted may vary across ethnic groups. This influences the degree to which employees resonate with these principles. Exploring the moderating role of ethnicity sheds light on how ethnic diversity shapes Ubuntu leadership practice's effectiveness in promoting EE.

### Age

Age, as a proxy for experience, introduces an additional layer of complexity to the relationship between Ubuntu leadership and EE. A leader's age, relative to their follower, moderates how their leadership is perceived (Kearney, 2008). Research also suggests that younger employees may perceive Ubuntu leadership practices differently from their more seasoned counterparts, given variations in expectations, communication preferences and work values (Kowske et al., 2010.) However, generational differences do not appear to be prevalent in the context of motivation (Heyns & Kerr, 2018).

### Tenure

In addition to age, tenure acts as a representation for familiarity within an organisation and introduces further complexity to the relationship between Ubuntu leadership and EE. Employees with varying tenures might exhibit different levels of receptivity to Ubuntu leadership, potentially impacting its influence on their engagement levels (Myeza & April 2021).

The above discussion leads to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

**H<sub>2</sub>:** The relationship between perceptions of Ubuntu leadership and EE is moderated by ethnicity, age and tenure.

## Research design

### Research design, participants and sampling techniques

This research adhered to a positivist philosophy, commonly associated with quantitative research, to explore the

relationship between the independent variable, Ubuntu leadership and the primary dependent variable, EE. Ethnicity, age and tenure were included as moderating variables in the regression analysis, influencing the choice of a deductive approach.

The study employed a descriptive research design, enabling the identification of areas for improving EE and recommending enhancements in implementing Ubuntu principles in workplaces. A survey design method was utilised, with a self-report questionnaire utilising Likert-type scales distributed to South African employees, aged 18–65 years, permanently employed in a corporate setting, and reporting to a manager.

Although South Africa has a diverse workforce, consisting of both permanent and non-permanent, corporate and non-corporate employees, this study focussed on recruiting a purposive sample of 250 participants who met the specified criteria. Recruitment efforts spanned professional networks, encompassing platforms such as LinkedIn, Twitter, WhatsApp and email. The final dataset was 193, after the exclusion of the certain respondents because of inclusion criteria not being met.

Though the final sample size was slightly below the initial target of 250, it is crucial to highlight the data's quality and reliability. The screening and data integrity measures ensured dependable and robust results, preserving the validity and credibility of the study's findings.

## Measuring instruments

This study utilised a self-report questionnaire, tailored to investigate specific facets of the research inquiry.

The initial section introduced the research topic and included a consent declaration, ensuring respondents' anonymity protection and emphasising aggregated data reporting, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw without penalty.

The subsequent section aimed to assess preliminary eligibility criteria, querying respondents on their organisation's location, corporate work environment, permanent employment status, age and managerial presence, pertinent to prior research on EE (Rupp et al., 2018).

Perceptions of Ubuntu leadership were evaluated using a scale developed by Muller et al. (2019). This scale evidenced good reliability with Muller et al. (2019) reporting Cronbach alpha values of between 0.9 and 0.93 in a sample of South African participants. In addition, factor analyses revealed that items loaded satisfactorily on each construct with factor loadings above 0.40, showing evidence of convergent validity (Muller et al., 2019).

Consisting of 20 items, the scale assessed respondents' perceptions across four dimensions – respect and dignity,

compassion, solidarity and survival – rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree engagement). The instrument sought to capture specific leadership behaviour and qualities within Ubuntu leadership. Respect and dignity consist of items reflecting fair treatment, equality and respectful conduct by leaders towards employees. Sample statements included 'My leader treats employees older than himself/herself with respect'.

Compassion dimensions assess the leader's empathy, concern and willingness to understand and support employees during personal challenges. 'My leader sees personal hardships of employees as an opportunity to serve them' represents this dimension.

Solidarity focussed on improving togetherness, teamwork and collective effort at work. The statement 'My leader fosters an atmosphere of togetherness at work' contributes to measuring perceptions regarding this aspect of Ubuntu leadership.

Survival measured leaders' resilience, adaptability and ability to navigate challenges effectively in the workplace. Items related to how leaders handle adversity or difficult situations are part of this dimension.

Employee engagement in this study was assessed using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) developed by Schaufeli et al. (2006). The UWES is a nine-item Likert-type scale that measures dimensions related to EE, including vigour, absorption and dedication. Participants rated their experiences on a scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (every day), providing valuable insights into their engagement levels. The validity of the UWES is supported by the reported alpha coefficients of 0.85 to 0.92 by Schaufeli et al. (2006), and the value of 0.85 reported by Reddy (2018). These coefficients highlight the consistent and reliable measurement of the work engagement construct by the scale's items, reinforcing its credibility in gauging EE.

## Research procedure

Before dissemination, the questionnaire was subjected to an ethical review process. Upon receiving the necessary ethical clearance, an internet-based survey was constructed using Google Forms. This survey was then distributed to a sample of 10 respondents.

From this pre-test, eight responses were gathered, and notably, none of the participants raised any concerns, despite being encouraged to do so if they had any reservations. Subsequently, the pilot survey was formally concluded, and it is essential to clarify that the data collected during this pilot study did not become a part of the analysis conducted in this study. Instead, its primary purpose was to fine-tune and improve the survey instrument and the overall data collection process, ensuring its effectiveness and clarity before commencing the main research study.

To maximise participation in the survey, a multi-faceted snowball sampling approach was employed. The survey was also advertised across different platforms, including LinkedIn and WhatsApp, with reminders. By leveraging these various promotional tactics, the authors aimed to gather a more diverse and representative sample of participants to enhance the quality and depth of the research study.

## Statistical analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) IBM Corp. Released 2021. IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 28.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp. The jamovi project (2023). jamovi (Version 2.3) (Computer Software). Retrieved from <https://www.jamovi.org> Sydney, Australia were used to analyse the data. Frequencies, means and standard deviations were computed as part of the analyses, using descriptive statistical techniques. The hypotheses were tested using Pearson correlation and a moderated multiple regression analysis.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Gordon Institute of Business Science (No. 21819409). Ethical issues like voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality were adhered to in the collection of the data.

## Results

The results are presented in the tables that follow. Significance levels for all analyses were set at  $p < 0.05$ . Table 1 provides

information on the demographics of the sample. The majority of the sample was black people and the bulk being women, with most respondents having a postgraduate qualification.

Most participants had worked at their company for a period of 1–4 years. The self-reported ethnic groups of white and mixed-race people were collapsed for further analyses because of the small sample sizes.

The descriptive statistics of the measures are presented in Table 2. The results indicate that both the Ubuntu leadership and the EE scales have excellent reliability in this sample. Mean scores on both measures suggest higher endorsement of the items on each measure.

The distribution of scores for the Ubuntu leadership and EE measures was examined using  $z$ -scores. The findings indicate a normal distribution of scores. According to Kim (2013), normality of distribution can be assumed if  $z$ -values for both absolute skewness and kurtosis are  $\leq 3.29$  in medium sized samples ( $50 \leq n \leq 300$ ).

The reliability analyses presented in Table 3 assess the internal consistency of the Ubuntu leadership and EE subscales. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were utilised to gauge the stability and reliability of the measurement instruments.

For the EE subscales, including vigour, dedication and absorption, the reliability analyses produced strong results. Vigour demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86, dedication

**TABLE 1:** Demographic characteristics of the sample ( $N = 193$ ).

Demographic characteristics	Total		Male ( $n = 81$ )		Female ( $n = 112$ )		$\chi^2$	$df$	$p$
	$n$	%	$n$	%	$n$	%			
<b>Age (in years)</b>									
18–29	17	8.8	3	3.7	14	12.5	4.74	2	0.19
30–39	105	54.4	48	59.3	57	50.9	-	-	-
40–49	54	28.0	23	28.4	31	27.7	-	-	-
50 and over	17	8.8	7	8.6	10	8.9	-	-	-
<b>Ethnic group</b>									
Black African people	73	37.8	31	38.3	42	37.5	1.46	2	0.48
Indian people	63	32.6	23	28.4	40	35.7	-	-	-
White or mixed race people	57	29.6	27	33.3	30	26.8	-	-	-
<b>Highest qualification</b>									
Matric/grade 12	24	12.4	10	12.3	14	12.5	0.01	2	0.99
Diploma/degree	42	21.8	18	22.2	24	21.4	-	-	-
Postgrad degree	127	65.8	53	65.4	74	66.1	-	-	-
<b>Tenure (in years)</b>									
1–4	123	63.7	50	61.7	73	65.2	0.24	2	0.88
5–9	52	26.9	23	28.4	29	25.9	-	-	-
10 and more	18	9.4	8	9.9	10	8.9	-	-	-

$df$ , degrees of freedom.

\* $p$  is significant at  $< 0.05$

**TABLE 2:** Descriptive statistics of the measures ( $N = 193$ ).

Measure	Score range	Minimum score	Maximum score	M	SD	Alpha coefficient
Ubuntu	119	21	140	97.9	28.9	0.98
EE	45	9	54	36.5	9.6	0.93

M, mean; SD, standard deviation; EE, employee engagement.

exhibited 0.83, and absorption displayed 0.78, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Regarding the Ubuntu leadership dimensions, solidarity, compassion, survival and dignity, the reliability analyses revealed robust internal consistency. Solidarity showed a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90, compassion exhibited 0.92, survival displayed 0.91, and dignity demonstrated 0.91, indicating high reliability.

These findings affirm the reliability and internal consistency of both the EE and Ubuntu leadership subscales, bolstering confidence in the accuracy and suitability of these instruments for assessing the intended constructs.

Table 4 provides information on the distribution. An inspection of the scatter plot showed that the distribution of scores is negatively skewed, suggesting that the scores are clustered to the right at higher values, while negative kurtosis values indicate a flatter distribution.

**TABLE 3:** Reliability analyses of the Ubuntu and employee engagement subscales.

Variable	No. of items	Cronbach's alpha
<b>Employee engagement</b>		
Vigour	3	0.86
Dedication	3	0.83
Absorption	3	0.78
<b>Ubuntu</b>		
Solidarity	5	0.90
Compassion	5	0.92
Survival	5	0.91
Dignity	5	0.91

**TABLE 4:** Distribution of the measures ( $N = 193$ ).

Measure	Skewness statistic	SE	z-value	Kurtosis statistic	SE	z-value
Ubuntu	-0.520	0.175	-2.98	-0.481	0.348	-1.39
EE	-0.309	0.175	-1.76	-2.790	0.314	-0.80

EE, employee engagement; SE, standard error.

**TABLE 5:** Moderated multiple regression results for the relationship between Ubuntu leadership and employee engagement, moderated by the demographic variables.

Predictor	95% confidence interval						$R^2$
	$B$	$\beta$	Lower	Upper	$t$	$p$	
Intercept†	18.74		12.80	24.68	6.22	< 0.001	-
UL	0.16	0.48	0.12	0.20	7.45	< 0.001	26.8
<b>Age (in years)</b>							
30–39 to 18–29	1.54	0.16	-2.83	5.93	0.69	0.48	-
40–49 to 18–29	4.75	0.49	0.05	9.44	1.99	0.05	-
50 and over to 18–29	3.32	0.34	-2.63	9.27	1.10	0.27	-
<b>Ethnicity</b>							
Indian people – Black African people	1.02	0.10	-1.94	3.99	0.68	0.45	-
Coloured and White people – Black African people	-0.08	-0.0	-3.10	3.06	0.01	0.98	-
<b>Tenure (in years)</b>							
5–9 to 1–4	-1.87	-0.1	-4.69	0.95	1.31	0.18	-
10 and over to 1–4	-0.9	-0.1	-5.39	3.58	0.39	0.69	-
UL * age	-0.02	-0.0	-1.18	1.14	0.03	0.97	27.8
UL * ethnicity	-0.21	-0.0	-1.46	1.03	0.34	0.73	-
UL * tenure	0.94	0.0	-0.36	2.24	1.41	0.15	-

Note: The \* represents the relationships between Ubuntu and age, ethnicity and tenure.

UL, Ubuntu leadership.

†, Represents reference level

$p$  is significant at < 0.05

A Pearson correlation analysis was used to explore the strength and direction of the relationship between Ubuntu leadership and EE. The results indicated a moderate positive correlation between the two variables ( $p = 0.49$ ,  $N = 193$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Using a moderated multiple regression analysis, the authors explored the ability of perceptions of Ubuntu leadership to predict EE in the workplace, and whether age, participant ethnicity and tenure moderated this relationship. The authors created three interaction terms (Ubuntu leadership  $\times$  age; Ubuntu leadership  $\times$  ethnicity; Ubuntu leadership  $\times$  tenure) for the analysis.

As can be seen in Table 5, the authors entered Ubuntu leadership and age, ethnic group, and tenure into the regression equation at step 1. The variance in EE explained by the model was  $R^2 = 26.8$ , Adj.  $R^2 = 23.6$ , with a statistically significant effect,  $F(8.184) = 8.42$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ . There was a statistically significant main effect of Ubuntu leadership on EE, but no significant main effect of age, ethnicity, or tenure on EE.

The inclusion of the interaction terms in step two of the model contributed additional variance to EE,  $R^2_{\text{change}} = 0.10$ ,  $F_{\text{change}}(11, 181) = 6.33$ ,  $p = 0.48$ ; however, there were no significant moderating effects for any of the demographic variables.

The correlations between the subscales of the Ubuntu leadership scale and EE were investigated to discern the relational dynamics between dimensions of Ubuntu

**TABLE 6:** Correlations between the subscales of the Ubuntu scale and the employee engagement scale.

Correlation	Solidarity	Compassion	Survival	Dignity	Vigour	Dedication	Absorption
Solidarity	1	0.908*	0.932*	0.910*	0.486*	0.473*	0.399*
Compassion	-	1.000	0.926*	0.913*	0.410*	0.418*	0.366*
Survival	-	-	1.000	0.906*	0.459*	0.465*	0.373*
Dignity	-	-	-	1.000	0.476*	0.475*	0.394*
Vigour	-	-	-	-	1.000	0.843*	0.686*
Dedication	-	-	-	-	-	1.000	0.780*
Absorption	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.000

\*, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

leadership and EE. Table 6 exhibits correlation coefficients between solidarity, compassion, survival, dignity (dimensions of Ubuntu leadership), and vigour, dedication, and absorption (dimensions of EE).

According to the findings, there are strong and positive correlations between Ubuntu leadership dimensions and dimensions of EE. Notably, solidarity, a pivotal dimension of Ubuntu leadership, exhibited high positive correlations with compassion (0.908), survival (0.932) and dignity (0.910), signifying strong associations between fostering a sense of togetherness, demonstrating compassion, ensuring survival, and upholding dignity within leadership practices and the various dimensions of EE.

Similarly, compassion, survival and dignity dimensions of Ubuntu leadership demonstrated strong positive relationships with EE dimensions, reflecting the importance of these leadership traits in influencing employees' engagement levels. Compassion displayed significant correlations with solidarity (0.908), survival (0.926) and dignity (0.913), indicating the interconnectedness between empathetic leadership, solidarity and a sense of dignity in influencing EE.

Furthermore, the correlations established the interconnectedness between survival within Ubuntu leadership and EE dimensions. Survival exhibited high positive correlations with solidarity (0.932), compassion (0.926) and dignity (0.906), highlighting the role of ensuring collective survival and EE.

The correlations between dignity and EE dimensions underscored its positive associations with solidarity (0.910), compassion (0.913) and survival (0.906), underlining the significance of upholding dignity in leadership to foster EE.

These findings substantiate the critical role of Ubuntu leadership dimensions – solidarity, compassion, survival and dignity – in influencing facets of EE. The strong positive correlations signify the importance of fostering a sense of togetherness, compassion, survival and dignity within leadership practices to enhance EE levels within organisational settings.

## Discussion

The present study investigates the relationship between Ubuntu leadership and EE within South Africa. Age, ethnicity and tenure were also examined as potential moderating

factors. The research explored the impact of this culturally rooted leadership style on EE.

A key hypothesis of the study was that perceptions of Ubuntu leadership influence EE. The confirmation of this hypothesis in this study aligns seamlessly with well-established literature on the positive impact of leadership style on EE (Milhem et al., 2019; Othman et al., 2017). Based on these findings, it is evident that the adoption of Ubuntu leadership principles plays a pivotal role in motivating EE, thereby demonstrating the importance of culturally rooted leadership approaches, a finding confirmed across diverse contexts (Muller et al., 2019; Tauetsile, 2021).

The second hypothesis, which was that the demographic variables of age, ethnicity and tenure moderate the Ubuntu leadership–EE relationship, was not supported by the study findings. It is possible that these issues have a separate relationship with EE, but that perceptions of Ubuntu leadership transcend these issues.

However, these findings contradict that of previous research indicating that demographic factors influence leadership–EE relationships (Heyns & Kerr, 2018; Kearney, 2008), and that perceptions of leadership are also affected by ethnicity (Chong & Thomas, 1997; Zhu et al., 2009). The study findings therefore raise interesting questions about leadership, EE and demographics in our sample. For example, we expected that since our sample was made up predominantly of black participants, this would act as a moderator in the relationship between perceptions of Ubuntu leadership and EE. However, black people's relationship with the concept of Ubuntu itself is a conflicted one (Gade, 2012). On the one hand, it is seen as empowering as it encompasses gender inclusion, support and human dignity, but paradoxically, it may also marginalise them from this support when they try to challenge hegemonic masculinity in the spaces they inhabit (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2016). This has important implications for the South African workplace, which has historically been characterised by gender and ethnicity issues.

As a construct intrinsic to the African context, Ubuntu leadership styles and EE are intrinsically intertwined with their surrounding cultural and historical contexts and cannot be comprehensively analysed without consideration of this context. Despite its recent transformation, South Africa's complex social fabric bears the indelible imprints of apartheid, with its associated power dynamics visible in all

spaces. Organisations need to recognise that leadership styles that replicate this power dynamic influence how employees interact with their work environment. The study findings suggest that organisations should prioritise leadership development programmes that incorporate Ubuntu values. They should create inclusive work environments and focus on building empathic relationships between leaders and employees. Ubuntu leadership, with its concentration on human interconnectedness and shared values, can contribute to a workplace culture that promotes collaboration, empathy and a sense of belonging.

## Practical implications

The present study underscores the practical significance of understanding the intricate relationship between Ubuntu leadership and EE for organisational leaders and managers. This understanding extends beyond theoretical insights, offering guidance on how leaders can effectively cultivate engagement and establish an organisational environment rooted in Ubuntu principles. The dimensions of Ubuntu leadership, namely solidarity, compassion, dignity and survival, give indicators to managers on how to develop their leadership style to enhance the engagement of their employees.

Organisational leaders and managers play a pivotal role in shaping the workplace environment, and their recognition of Ubuntu leadership's core principles, including the cultivation of genuine relationships, empathy, collaboration and respect, and holds the potential to forge stronger connections between managers and employees. This recognition lays the cornerstone for creating a supportive ecosystem where employees not only feel valued but also understood, leading to inspiration and a wholehearted commitment to contribute to the organisation's goals.

The incorporation of Ubuntu's collaborative ethos encourages an environment of open communication and collective problem-solving. Embracing participatory decision-making and valuing diverse perspectives contributes to effective collaboration and knowledge sharing among team members. This cultivates an atmosphere where ideas flow freely, innovation thrives, and employees are intrinsically motivated to actively participate.

Ubuntu leadership's emphasis on empathy and relationship-building can significantly enhance job satisfaction and commitment among employees. Managers who genuinely care about the well-being of their employees instil a profound sense of belonging, ultimately leading to increased loyalty and a deeper emotional investment in the organisation's mission and objectives.

Furthermore, the integration of Ubuntu principles within leadership practices has the potential to nurture a positive organisational culture marked by trust, respect and mutual support. Such a culture, rooted in Ubuntu's core values,

serves to mitigate conflicts, promote inclusivity and foster a sense of psychological safety. In this environment, employees are empowered to engage fully, contribute their best efforts and collaborate effectively, thereby enhancing overall organisational performance.

Moreover, the principles of Ubuntu leadership inherently align with employee well-being (Milhem et al., 2019; Othman et al., 2017). By acknowledging individual needs, promoting work-life balance, and providing resources to manage stress, organisational leaders contribute to employee health and satisfaction. This approach resonates deeply with employees, leading to reduced stress levels, heightened job satisfaction, and a healthier equilibrium between work and personal life. This underlines the organisation's genuine commitment to employee well-being, supporting a workplace where Ubuntu principles thrive, and EE flourishes.

Encouraging inclusive decision-making, promoting open communication channels, and investing in leadership development programmes serve to further reinforce Ubuntu principles within the organisational culture. By recognising and celebrating employee contributions, organisational leaders not only demonstrate appreciation but also fortify engagement.

## Limitations and recommendations for future research

There are a few possible limitations to the study. Smaller samples may not have enough statistical power for analyses that involve too many variables, resulting in Type II errors which may render the study meaningless (Pallant, 2020). The authors mitigated against the risk of this error by ensuring a sample size of 193 participants and by also only exploring a limited number of variables in the study. As such, future research that tests for the influence of industry type, seniority of both leaders and education of followers would be beneficial. The study took place in South Africa; as such, future studies could test for the influence of Ubuntu leadership dimensions in other countries.

The authors only measured the effect of perceptions of Ubuntu leadership on EE. While this study represents a meaningful contribution towards the demonstration of the value of Ubuntu leadership, its broader benefits can also be tested. Other dependant variables such as employee wellbeing, team voice and innovation could be included in future studies involving the influence of Ubuntu leadership. The Cronach's alpha scores of Ubuntu leadership were higher than the recommended maximum of 0.9 (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011) and, as such, there is a risk of insufficient discrimination in the scale that could benefit from investigation in a future study.

Another area for future studies pertains to leadership development programmes, especially relating to how leadership development initiatives could effectively instil

Ubuntu principles among leaders and impact EE. Investigating the mechanisms and strategies for cultivating Ubuntu leadership qualities through development programmes would provide valuable insights for organisational leaders seeking to incorporate these principles into their leadership practices.

## Conclusion

The relevance of Ubuntu leadership in enhancing EE within South African workplaces is highlighted by this research which makes a significant contribution to existing literature. The study contributes meaningfully to the ongoing dialogue surrounding leadership, EE, and workplace culture as it speaks to how the integration of Ubuntu leadership principles holds transformative potential for organisational leaders and managers. The study augments the existing literature by highlighting the pivotal role of Ubuntu leadership in promoting better EE within South African workplaces. The main study findings demonstrate the necessity for bottom-up leadership in the South African context. Consequently, this study represents a substantial addition to the ongoing dialogue encompassing leadership, EE, and the diverse cultural tapestry of the workplace.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

K.C. designed and developed the research concepts, methodology, data collection and analysis in conjunction with G.P. in his role as supervisor.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study can be made available by the lead author (K.C.) upon reasonable request.

### Disclaimer

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

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