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## MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Coaching leadership as a link between individual- and team-level strength use at work

Liisa Mäkelä<sup>1</sup>, Hilpi Kangas<sup>2\*</sup>, Eveliina Korkiakangas<sup>2</sup> and Jaana Laitinen<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** This qualitative study delves into the interplay between coaching leadership and the utilization of strengths at both individual and team levels. Despite the acknowledged significance of this interplay, there is a scarcity of empirical qualitative research in this domain. Thus, this study aimed to address this gap by examining the prevalence and effectiveness of coaching leadership practices and strength use. Through a qualitative research approach, data from 17 supervisors and 23 employees within elderly care units were analyzed using template analysis. The outcomes of this study underscore the pivotal role of leadership in facilitating the application of strengths within the workplace, highlighting the interconnectedness of individual and team-level strength utilization. The findings of this study reveal that leadership plays a pivotal role in enabling and facilitating strength use at work, and that individual- and team-level strength use are linked. Leaders need to personally know their team members at the individual level, empower teams to work autonomously, and create a safe, open atmosphere for diversity at the team level. Adopting qualitative methodology, the study comprehends how coaching leadership facilitates strength utilization. This nuanced approach contributes to literature, enhancing our understanding of leadership's role in optimizing strengths in a professional context.

**Subjects:** Introductory Work/Organizational Psychology; Leadership; Executive Coaching; Work Motivation

**Keywords:** leadership; coaching leadership; strength use; health care; elderly care

## 1. Introduction

Every individual has strengths, i.e., “specific individual characteristics, traits, and abilities that, when employed, are energizing and allow a person to perform at his or her personal best” (van Woerkom et al., 2016, p. 960). In the context of working life, being able to recognize, utilize and develop one's strengths has been related to several positive outcomes, for instance, work engagement and well-being (Harzer & Ruch, 2013; Keenan & Mostert, 2013; Meyers et al., 2019), reduced stress and burnout (Meyers et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2011), and good self- and manager-rated job performance (van Woerkom et al., 2016). It has also been shown to be beneficial for the team-based quality of care in nursing homes (Buljac-Samardžić et al., 2018).

Organizational support of strength use at work is essential (Els et al., 2018; van Woerkom et al., 2022) and has been identified as an especially important job resource in the context of high job

demands (van Woerkom et al., 2016). The health care sector, in particular the elderly care sector, has been described as overdemanding (Audenaert et al., 2020). Therefore, studying how the organization supports strength use in this challenging context is important, because organizations that help their employees understand, utilize and develop their unique strengths, are likely to have committed, motivated, and competent personnel (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2018).

Earlier literature has identified leaders as organizational agents who support individuals' strength use at work (Ding & Chu, 2020; Ding & Yu, 2021; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015). Coaching leadership refers to supervisory work that identifies and exploits an employee's potential, develops their abilities, and helps them learn, with the aim of promoting the performance of both the employee and the organization as a whole (Bond & Seneque, 2013; Ellinger et al., 2008; Tanskanen et al., 2018; Viitala, 2004), thus providing a suitable framework for studying organizational support of strength use at work.

Most previous studies of organizational support of strength use at work have represented the quantitative research tradition and utilized survey data and statistical analysis methods. Strength use at work has mainly been approached at the individual level, but recently it has been suggested that the team context plays an important role in how strengths are used at work (van Woerkom et al., 2022). Furthermore, the theoretical model presented by van Woerkom and her colleagues (van Woerkom et al., 2022) suggests that the organizational climate is a crucial factor in the multi-level process (individual and team) in terms of strength use at work, and leaders play a key role in nurturing and developing the organizational climate (Dwertmann & Boehm, 2016; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015). It has also been suggested that leaders should employ strength-based practices not only among their individual subordinates but also in teams (Yuan et al., 2019). However, to the best of our knowledge, no empirical research has been conducted on how leadership supports strength use at work on the individual and team level.

Our aim is to fill this gap in the literature. Due to the novelty of the phenomena, we relied on the qualitative research tradition and utilized data on 17 supervisors and 23 employees working in elderly care units. Our work was guided by the Conservation of resources (COR) theory, which is based on the argument that having and gaining resources (i.e., leader support of strength use) leads to positive spirals and outcomes, whereas a lack or loss of resources tends to make people compensate for the gap by seeking other resources. If this is not successful, negative outcomes will follow (Hobfoll, 2002; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Our contribution is threefold: First, our study contributes to the strength use literature by focusing on our participants' perceptions of how leadership and strength use at work are related; second, it reveals how coaching leadership at the individual and team level promotes strength use at work; third, as it was conducted in a high-demand sector with a labor shortage, specifically elderly care organizations, it adds to the knowledge on organizational support of strength use at work in a challenging work environment.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Conservation of resources theory

COR theory is based on the idea that individuals attempt to acquire, maintain, protect, and foster things they value, i.e., resources (Hobfoll, 2001). It is a suitable theory for the context of work and organizations (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Resources can be objects or material goods (e.g., salary), energy (e.g., time), personal characteristics (e.g., personal strengths or skills) or conditions (e.g., having a coaching leader). Resources are salient for an individual's well-being, and if one loses or is under threat of losing some resources, the importance of other obtained resources increases. Having fewer resources makes people more vulnerable to resource loss than those with greater resources. This negative process is called a loss spiral (Demerouti et al., 2004; Hobfoll, 2001) and leads to negative outcomes such as reduced well-being at work or decreased commitment to the

organization. It has also been shown that the more resources available, the greater are the opportunities to acquire new resources (Hobfoll, 2001). This kind of positive process is known as a resource caravan (Hobfoll, 2002) or a gain spiral (Hakanen et al., 2011; Hobfoll, 2001) and is likely to be linked to positive outcomes such as higher performance and commitment.

In the context of work in the public elderly care sector in Finland, in which this study was conducted, issues related to resources are salient. In Finnish elderly care, the practical nurse mainly assists and administers daily care to the elderly; registered nurses in turn are responsible for organizing care and carrying out demanding nursing tasks. Registered nurses are often also team leaders. Head nurses in charge of one or several elderly care units allocate tasks and make decisions on, for example, work shifts (Sulander et al., 2016). Labor shortage is typical in elderly care organizations. The majority of employees (nurse assistants/nurse aides, practical nurses, registered nurses) receive relatively low pay (Sulander et al., 2016) and often do shift work (FIOH, 2022). All these challenges relate to societal level systems and policies and lead to fewer resources being available at work. Therefore, the resources within an organization and those of each individual working there should be utilized and supported in order to compensate for possible shortages of other resources and initiate resource caravan processes, which are important for individual well-being and positive organizational outcomes. In this study, we focus on coaching leadership as a possible condition resource that is essential for activating and utilizing strength use at work, which in turn represents a personal-level resource in organizations.

## **2.2. Organizational support of strength use at work**

Strength use at work stems from the positive psychology literature and is based on the idea that all individuals have certain behavioral, cognitive and affective capacities that energize them and enable optimal functioning (Linley, 2008; see for a review; Miglianico et al., 2020). Strengths are considered stable but not fixed, and they develop naturally over the life course but also as a result of conscious effort (Biswas-Diener, 2006; Park et al., 2021).

In the context of work and organizations, a deeper understanding of strength use at work is beneficial, as using strengths at work has been linked to positive well-being outcomes among individuals, such as personal growth, less stress, greater self-esteem, vitality, and positive affect (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2019; Wood et al., 2011). Moreover, if strength use at work is supported and encouraged in an organization, positive outcomes seem to follow. For instance, employees who are encouraged to use their strengths at work cope better with their workload and are less often absent (van Woerkom et al., 2016). Organizational support of strength use has also been linked to higher levels of vitality, flow, passion, engagement in work (Dubreuil et al., 2016; Forest et al., 2012; Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2017; Van Woerkom et al., 2015, for a review see; Miglianico et al., 2020), better performance (Harzer & Rush, 2014), and lower intention to quit (Els et al., 2018). Thus, organizational support of strength use at work is essential (Els et al., 2018; van Woerkom et al., 2022) and has been identified as an especially important job resource in the context of high job demands (van Woerkom et al., 2016). Therefore, it is also likely to be relevant in the elderly care sector.

Organizations can promote strength use in several ways; for instance, by providing the opportunity for collaboration between colleagues whose skills complement each other, or by designing and allocating tasks on the basis of employees' individual strengths (Linley & Harrington, 2006). Strength use can also be supported by different human resource management processes in organizations: Recruitment and employee selection can ensure a fit between employee strengths and job role, and the focus of performance management and development discussions can be on strengths rather than deficits (Els et al., 2018). In addition, interventions and training programs that help employees identify, develop, and use their strengths are also one way in which organizations can support strength use at work (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2017).

The earlier literature has identified leaders as key organizational actors in the promotion of employees' strength use at work (Ding & Chu, 2020; Ding & Yu, 2021; van Woerkom & Meyers,

2015). One stream in leadership research that strongly acknowledges the support of employees' strengths as the core of supervisory work is *coaching leadership* (Batson & Yoder, 2012; Ellinger et al., 2003; Wang et al., 2022). Therefore, coaching leadership and how it can contribute to strength use at work is our next focus.

### **2.3. Coaching leadership as a conditional resource for strength use at work on the individual and team level**

Coaching leadership refers to supervisory work that identifies and exploits an employee's potential, develops their abilities, and helps them learn. It aims to promote the performance of both the subordinate and the organization as a whole (Bond & Seneque, 2013; Ellinger et al., 2008; Tanskanen et al., 2018; Yuan et al., 2019).

Coaching leadership is a combination of cognition, attitudes and behavior; coaching leaders respect their employees' skills and knowledge and consider them capable and able to develop (McCarthy & Milner, 2013). Coaching leaders influence their subordinate's feelings and attitudes at work by encouragement, guidance, facilitation, and inspiration (Ellinger, 2013; Heslin et al., 2006; Yuan et al., 2019). They also enable their employees to take an independent and responsible work role (Rapp-Ricciardi et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022) and their leadership behavior is based on asking for rather than providing readymade solutions and answers; they are good listeners and have analytical skills (Ellinger, 2013). Therefore, coaching leaders are able to identify the needs of their subordinates and encourage them to find their strengths and utilize them at work (Batson & Yoder, 2012; Ellinger et al., 2003).

The previous literature has reported that coaching leadership facilitates employees' personal learning (Park et al., 2021) and openness to change (Yuan et al., 2019). Coaching leadership has also shown to strengthen employees' voice behavior, i.e., employees' willingness to offer their opinions on how to improve their organization (Wang et al., 2017; Yuan et al., 2019) and their constructive deviance, defined as "employees' voluntary behavior that violates significant norms with the aim of improving the well-being of an organization, its members or both" (Cui et al., 2022). Coaching leadership has also been positively related to employees' perceptions of the fairness of performance evaluations (Dello Russo et al., 2017), objective and subjective career success (Peng et al., 2019), and work performance (Tanskanen et al., 2018).

In light of the above, it seems that coaching leadership has the potential to be a source of organizational support of strength use at work as it has been linked to several positive outcomes that have similar elements to strength use at work. For instance, it is likely that starting to use one's strengths at work is a process of change and learning, which coaching leadership seems to promote. In addition, team support of strength use at work has been linked to employees' willingness to improve organizational practices (Buljac-Samardžić et al., 2018), and similar outcomes have been associated with coaching leadership, such as voice behavior and constructive deviance. Coaching leadership can also be assumed to be a possible source of support of strength use because of its similar outcomes related to well-being and performance.

Based on COR theory, and on the literature on strength use at work and coaching leadership, we suggest that coaching leadership has the potential to be an essential work resource and a source of organizational support of strength use. Thus, in line with the basis of COR theory, a coaching leader may improve strength use at work at both the individual and team level. However, although we too see coaching leadership as an ideal resource for strength use at work, we admit that in real work life, not every leader coaches their employees and teams. Therefore, we also suggest that if this resource is missing at work, and coaching leadership is lacking or deficient, employees and teams begin to utilize other compensatory resources.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Data and methods

This qualitative data was based on 40 semi-structured theme interviews conducted in four health care organizations as part of a larger study conducted in Finland in 2021. Qualitative interview studies have been identified as a rigorous and valuable method for understanding the intricate nuances of leadership dynamics, offering insights into the subjective experiences, perceptions, and behaviors of both leaders and followers within organizational contexts (Bryman, 2004; Cadge et al., 2021; Pemsar & Rousi, 2023). The interviewees received information about the study project from their own organization. They enrolled voluntarily for the interviews via a Webropol survey. Two researchers selected the interviewees, taking into account their diversity in terms of, for example, type of work unit, occupation, and work experience. These individual theme interviews were conducted via Teams because of COVID-19 restrictions, by three researchers. Each researcher conducted the interview alone, but before beginning, they discussed the themes with each other in order to ensure a common understanding. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Their length varied between 45 and 58 minutes and the transcriptions between 14 and 27 pages (Calibri 12, spacing 1.15). Table 1 presents the participants' sociodemographic characteristics. The ethics committee of (anonymous) granted ethical approval of the study (12/2020).

#### 3.2. Data analysis

The data analysis used the template analysis method, which is a qualitative analysis method and a particular style of thematic analysis (King, 2012) that has been widely used in organizational and management studies (King et al., 2018; Radcliffe et al., 2023) as well as in other contexts, such as nursing studies (Doyle et al., 2020; Fernández-Castillo et al., 2021). The analysis was conducted with the help of Atlas.ti 9 software. Template analysis uses rather strong hierarchical coding and is highly structured, but at the same time it is flexible and useful in different cases (Brooks et al., 2015).

| Profession              | (licensed) practical nurse             | 16 |
|-------------------------|--|----|
|                         | registered nurse                       | 6  |
|                         | supervisor                             | 14 |
|                         | line manager                           | 3  |
|                         | other                                  | 1  |
| Type of work unit       | home care services                     | 15 |
|                         | long-term care facility                | 13 |
|                         | institutional services (hospital ward) | 11 |
|                         | home care, assisted living facilities  | 1  |
| Gender                  | female                                 | 39 |
|                         | male                                   | 1  |
| Work experience (years) | under one year                         | 1  |
|                         | 1–4 years                              | 5  |
|                         | 5–9 years                              | 5  |
|                         | 10–15 years                            | 7  |
|                         | 16–20 years                            | 5  |
|                         | more than 20 years                     | 16 |
|                         | unknown                                | 1  |

At the beginning of the data analysis, the researchers familiarized themselves with the interview data. Then, they created a preliminary coding template by reflecting the themes that were relevant or interesting to explore. The process of creating the template involved reviewing the data and identifying key themes. After the themes were identified, they were organized into a hierarchical structure, with the broad and more abstract themes at the top and the more specific sub-themes underneath. These themes formed the basis of the coding template.

After the coding template was created, the researchers applied it to the data by systematically coding each segment of text that corresponded to one of the categories in the coding template. The coding process involved assigning a code or label to each segment of text, indicating which category it belonged to. At this stage the template was modified to match the data (Brooks et al., 2015). After all the data had been coded, the researchers analyzed them by examining patterns and relationships within and across the categories. This allowed them to identify the key themes that emerged from the data presented in the Table 2.

#### 4. Findings

It became clear that to enable strength use, supervisors need to use coaching leadership with each of their followers individually as well as collectively within their team, presented in the Figure 1. If coaching leadership is lacking or exists on only an individual level, strength use is possible, but largely dependent on the individuals' own initiative and personal-level skills, such as self-leadership. If team-level coordination is inadequate or not based on official nominations, substitute leadership or emergent leadership may also exist. In this case, perceptions of commitment may seem more fragmented, and experiences of unfairness may emerge. Subordinates who worked with a supervisor who was using coaching and thus supporting their strength use were more committed to their organization and often less thought about changing their job than their counterparts whose supervisors did not use coaching leadership.

Next, we dissect the use of coaching leadership skills in more detail on both the individual and team level.

#### 5. Coaching leadership and strength use on the individual level

The findings suggest that one of the most important factors in the process of identifying individual strengths and enabling their use that we identified in our interviewees' narratives was the leader's knowledge of each of their subordinates' personal characteristics. Through being interested and individual consideration, the leader got to know their subordinates and was able to identify individual strengths. In day-to-day leadership, the leader could use many strategies to obtain this knowledge of their subordinates.

The leader's **interest** was a focal element in identifying their subordinates' individual strengths. The leaders used multiple methods to get to know their subordinates. It became clear that daily leadership, which meant showing interest in day-to-day situations through regular encounters, was essential. One important interaction routine was giving feedback, asking questions, and engaging in discussions about work. One leader described how they had regularly created opportunities to meet their subordinates individually and how through feedback, they had strengthened their competence and strength use.

Yes, and really [the manager should] be interested in things and in their employees, (...)  
They don't need to point their finger at us, and say that you have to behave now, but just generally discuss things with us, everyone should be valued and so on, because these things are not always so simple either. Employee (nr 7).

On an individual level, supervisor support of strength use was perceived to be directed more towards the individual and their professional and personal growth. The strengths were often tied to the employees' competence and perceived meaningfulness. On the individual level, the

**Table 2. Template analysis**

**Coaching leadership and strength use on the individual level**

1. Interest of the leader
  - 1.1. Importance of leader's personal knowledge of subordinate
    - 1.1.1. Creating opportunities to get to know employees
    - 1.1.2. Daily leadership
  - 1.2. Individual strengths tied to personal growth
  - 1.3. Negative consequences of leader's lack of interest in subordinates
    - 1.3.1. Limited opportunities to use strengths
    - 1.3.2. Reflection of low trust in subordinates
    - 1.3.3. Professional self-esteem and perception of poor competence and strengths
2. Individual consideration
  - 2.1. Identification and support of new strengths
    - 2.1.1. Remodeling of work tasks
    - 2.1.2. Consent of work group to individually modified tasks
  - 2.2. Proactive role of leader in enabling strength use
    - 2.2.1. Suggestions for possible professional development routes
    - 2.2.2. Importance of providing autonomy and building trust
    - 2.2.3. Providing training opportunities
3. Identification of each employee's strengths
  - 3.1. Accessibility of leader for open dialogue with subordinates
    - 3.1.1. Engaging in dialogue about professional possibilities and interests
    - 3.1.2. Importance of being seen as open and reliable

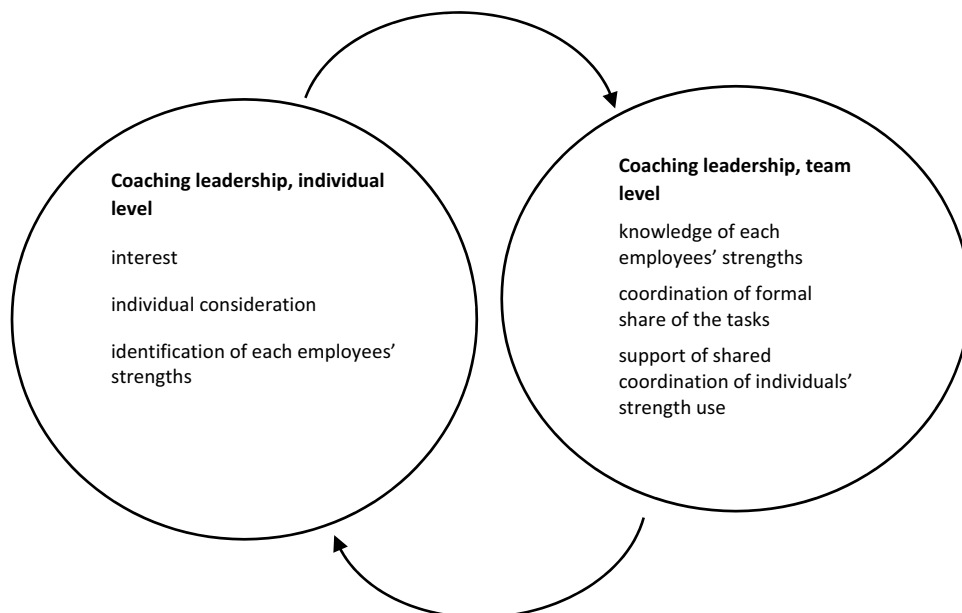
**Coaching leadership and strength use on the team level**

1. Knowledge of each employee's strengths
  - 1.1. From team-level identification to team-level use
    - 1.1.1. Fair distribution of opportunities to use strengths
  - 1.2. Diversity in strength use
    - 1.2.1 Diversity creates tension?
    - 1.2.2. Enabling the strength use of new employees
  - 1.3. Creating a psychologically safe environment
    - 1.3.1. Supporting a culture of strength use and openness
    - 1.3.2. Subordinates can create their own methods for team-level strength use
    - 1.3.3. Strong individuals take charge behind the leader's back.
2. Coordination of formal share of tasks
  - 2.1. Each team member should be able to use their strength in some area of their work
  - 2.2. Allocating team-level tasks on the basis of individual strengths
  - 2.3. Perception of team members' strengths
3. Support of shared coordination of individuals' strength use at team level
  - 3.1. Recognizing team members' professionalism
  - 3.2. Providing team-level autonomy for strength use

subordinates described strength identification and use as empowering and increasing work well-being. A focal viewpoint in being interested in and knowing the people was knowing their work. If the leader was familiar with the work and the particular work task, and their nature, they were better able to also identify which strengths were meaningful on an individual and/or team level.



**Figure 1. Coaching leadership on individual and team levels.**



(...) but it's really improved a lot, because the patients at this unit vary enormously and generally in these cases that we have here, new things arise every week, either new care procedures or other new things, I mean I've seen that I've learnt so much here (...) in my performance appraisal with my manager it also came up, exactly this, that now that I'm getting these areas of responsibility then I can freely look for suitable training courses and register for them and go to them, my manager is very positive about training, they have that kind of attitude, to maintain it, or like, take part in it, support the maintenance of our professional skills. Employee (nr 13).

On the negative side, if the leader was not, for some reason, keen on or active in getting to know their subordinates, many subordinates interpreted this as a lack of interest. In these situations, the subordinates also felt that their opportunities to use their strengths were limited, mainly as the leader did not recognize them. Moreover, the inability to recognize one's subordinate's strength often reflected low trust in their decisions or information. This could influence the subordinates' professional self-esteem and perception of their own competence and strengths.

(...) when they ask and I tell them how it is, they say, well it can be checked, like, whether it's been different before. Then I'm sort of on my hind legs somehow, it irritates me, that I mean, feel free to look, this is how we've done it here, and I don't believe that they're suddenly like, wrong. That's what it comes from (...) Really, when that soon-to-be ex care director, well I talked to them, they called me to ask how I was and I said to them then, I know I can do it, that's not the issue somehow, but I still feel (that my skills are not trusted). It's kind of crept in now. Employee (nr 15).

**Individual consideration** was perceived in situations in which the work of a subordinate had to, for various reasons, be remodeled; for example, if the subordinate was unable to continue their usual tasks due to health-related issues. In many such instances, the leader was able to identify and support the use of the individual's new strengths. An important element here was the work group's consent to individually modify the tasks. Team-level strength use was also activated, as the individually modified tasks could be carried out on the team level.

Yes, so it was tailored to suit me ... (...) my own supervisor suggested, when the occupational health physician said they wouldn't let me go back to shift work anymore. (...) Then I asked my supervisor if it's possible for me to do only day work. Then they said that this is something we need, would you like to try doing this, discharging people and sending them

home, that this could be tailored. (...) I thought I'd be a bit privileged, but quite quickly I could see it in my colleagues, what was the benefit of someone phoning relatives and discharging them. So, it kind of turned, that I ... Or then it encouraged me, that I'm an important person here after all. Employee (nr 24).

The leader's role in enabling strength use was not only to allow it; in some instances, the leader was more proactive in making suggestions about the possible routes the subordinates could take professionally. There was a notion of recognizing subordinates' important roles and possibilities. However, it was also important that, despite enabling strength use and creating an atmosphere of opportunities to use different strengths, the leader also gave the subordinates autonomy to further develop the tasks in which they used their strengths. It was also imperative to build trust and allow autonomy. Moreover, the supportive and enabling role of the leader seemed to be focal when the subordinate sought to develop their strengths through training opportunities.

*Interviewer 1: So what brings you joy in your current work at the moment?*

Speaker 1: (...)And the supervisor's really good. And their attitude towards their employees and this support of studying and self-development, mainting professional skills, it's a really good incentive for this work comminuty then. Employee (nr 19).

Speaker 1 [00:03:40]: (...)But then the reason why I'm in this organization in particular, that's another story of course. I believe that in this organization, the work has opportunities, development opportunities. I have a say in things, I'm trusted and I'm given the chance to do the things that are important to me, on quite a broad scale, and I can progress with these things. (...) Supervisor (nr 42).

In the process of **identifying each employees' strengths**, the leader's accessibility was perceived as essential. As noted earlier, it was important that the leader used proactive tactics and was generally keen to get to know the team and identify their strengths. However, it seems that the process was bi-directional: Acknowledging the strengths on an individual level often also required activity on the part of the subordinate. Through a closer leader—follower relationship, the parties could engage in open dialogue about the employee's professional possibilities and interests. Within this domain, the leader's accessibility, openness, and reliability were perceived as important.

Well, I mean this supervisor we have now is perhaps one of the best we've ever had. That they tell us things that concern us straight away, which has been fantastic, so, good. And then above all, that if we have something, that we have to ask something, for instance, then we can just call or send a message, and get through to them when we need help. Or if we can't get hold of them straight away, then they always reply to the message or call when they are able to. So really, it's been, like, really personally important to me that if I need something I can send them a message, I prefer sending messages because I don't want, I don't know if they have a meeting or something, so that I don't disturb them then. And then they can answer the message as soon as they have a moment to do so. Employee (nr 40).

To conclude, the findings emphasize the importance of leaders possessing knowledge of their subordinates' personal characteristics and aspirations for identifying and enabling the use of their individual strengths. It seems that by adapting coaching tactics, being active and interested in the employees and their development and growth, the leaders inspired the employees and made them recognize their own strengths. The process of identifying strengths requires activeness on the part of both the leader and the subordinate, and the leader must be accessible and open to enable honest dialogue about professional opportunities and interests.

## **6. Coaching leadership and strength use on the team level**

On the team level of recognizing and supporting strength use, it became clear that the process began by identifying each subordinate's individual strengths. If the leader was unable to distinguish the strengths of the individuals, they were less likely to use these strengths on the team

level. Moreover, if the leader recognized and enabled the strength use of only a few individuals, this seemed to lead to feelings of unfairness among the work team. Therefore, by considering and identifying the individual's characteristics, the leader was also able to formulate opportunities for strength use at the team level. As identifying and enabling individual-level strength use was highly person oriented, strength use at the team level was connected more to professional and work-related elements. For example, the leader coordinated the allocation of tasks and responsibilities to distribute work effectively. However, it was also important that they recognized and facilitated the process of subordinates' shared strength use within the team.

One important element, in addition to recognizing individual strengths, was identifying and employing strengths through diversity. This was firmly based on **knowing each employee's strengths**. Many interviewees, both leaders and subordinates, raised the issue of strengths of employees of different ages. Many recognized that often, these groups' strengths differed. It was considered important to first recognize that these differences could cause tensions, and then to identify how these differences could be turned into something positive.

(...) the atmosphere is really good here and we help each other and support each other, there are no stupid questions, even though we've worked together for ages.(...)This way I feel that the supervisors' role in this, that how they support the team's cooperation, is that I also have time as a supervisor to listen to them and chat to them, that's something I don't want to give up, even if it means having many things on my plate, the fact that the employee is heard. Supervisor (nr 8).

openness and trust, that we think about things together and try to cope together and what I find important too, is this age management, we have employees from over four decades here, from the very young to those just about to retire. At the moment we have many working here who have already retired, and we're grateful to them, that they still have the energy to work. Then thinking about being able to get on with each age group and what their attitude to work is and their expectations of work are. I feel that this is sometimes mentally very tiring, but then it's also so rewarding. Supervisor (nr 8).

Therefore, when the leader portrayed behaviors that supported the development of strengths, it created positive outcomes on both individual and team levels. When it came to individual strength use for the benefit of the team, it was important that the leader also portrayed support and encouragement. For example, in the case of new employees, it was important not only to recognize the strengths of the individual, but also to facilitate and support the opportunity to use these strengths as an essential contributor to the team. Moreover, it was typical for a reasonable number of on-call staff to only work for short periods of time in a team and the perceptions of these employees were rather mixed. Overall, the identification and effective use of strengths on the team level required intentional, planned actions on the part of the leader. It seems that there was a lot of potential in having diverse work team, but if the leader was not able to support the team-level identification and use of each employee's strengths, some of this potential could be lost; for example, the utilization of networks acquired when doing on-call work in different organizations.

Interviewer 1: Yes, sure. So, if you think about the employees, younger employees and then maybe employees who are already more experienced in this field, then can you say what kind of skills we need more of in elderly work?

Speaker 1: In a way, what these older employers, what they have learnt to do and are used to doing, it's fine. It's kind of, somehow, really comprehensive and sort of ... They do more than they should, perhaps. It's good, but then of course we don't have enough time. And then the good thing about young people is that they more or less, for example, if it says what they have to do, then they do exactly that. It's really good to have both, both kinds of carers there. Supervisor (nr 45).

The important element in team-level support of strength use was creating a psychologically safe environment (Climate). It also became clear that the leader should act openly and transparently when distributing tasks and coordinating individuals' strength use on the team level. Moreover, it seems that leaders' coaching behaviors could be linked to team-level goals and shared responsibility for these goals:

Speaker 2 [00:23:12]: (...)I'm good at listening and easily approachable, and positivity (...) my strengths are these interactive skills and being with people and (...) I like coaching groups (...) you have to have goals (...) we work towards the goals together. Supervisor (nr 8).

If the team-level atmosphere did not support common strength use and openness, some strong individuals might steer their direction behind the leader's back. In these situations, it seemed the subordinates bypassed the leader and formulated their own methods for team-level strength use. In these teams, strength use was self-regulated and autonomous, and in some cases strengths could be used unfairly.

The teams had multiple tasks and roles to fulfil. Many subordinates felt that one important element of team-level work was that through individual strengths, the leader **coordinated the formal distribution of tasks**. This meant that through team-level consideration, each team member was able to use their strength in some area of their work.

Speaker 1 [00:31:42]: yes. So, what if you think about finding the area of responsibility for each one, how does that process take place?

Speaker 2 [00:31:58]: Well, it's a bit, maybe it's been divided according to what they're interested in. What each one likes(...) It's like for everyone, what they like. (...) Sort of, what feels most like your own thing. (...) It's like these areas of responsibility are distributed according to what people are interested in. No-one has had to do work that, or had an area of responsibility that's not their own thing. Employee (nr. 30).

I mainly mean, whatever each person wants, that it's their own strengths until now it's gone a bit according to everyone's own strengths. And you might take one or two with whom to do it and then at other times it might be the whole gang, so it varies. And of course, how our clients are feeling, we can't force anyone to come there, and that decides a lot, but now we're planning to do a sort of rough, preliminary weekly or monthly plan, that, for example, Wednesday could be a singing day, or Tuesday an exercise day, so that, their close ones would know too, that on Wednesdays we always do a certain thing at a certain time, and we could make these stimulation activities visible to outsiders too. Supervisor (nr 1).

On the team level, it was essential that the leader had a good overall idea of the team and their individual strengths to provide **support for the shared coordination of individuals' strength use**. One leader described this as making individual competences and strengths visible through shared team meetings and discussions:

First of all, the fact that we understand each other's work, it all starts from that. (...) So, this is just an example, the basics, where we've started from and begun to unravel it, like, hey my task in this team is to do this and my area of responsibility is this and my area of responsibility means these things here. We're in the middle of updating our areas of responsibility along with our performance appraisals, so the purpose is also to present our own areas of responsibility and think together what this means in our area of responsibility and of course then developing our skills within our areas of responsibility. (...) Supervisor. (nr 8).

It was also important that the leaders were aware that the team members were the best professionals for the tasks and jobs. The role of the leader was seen as that of a facilitator or enabler of best practices for organizing work, and as empowering the design of work and people's roles to best promote team-level functioning. This created team-level autonomy for employees to

best fit their strength use to their work. In an ideal situation, the leader would enable strength use and team-level coordination of use, empowering the team to make adjustments and innovate in team-level decisions.

But in our community, for example, innovativeness and development and somehow, that ... And what we talked about – that in a way people have learnt to trust themselves and dare to do things, they don't always ask me as I kind of ... That somehow, they take responsibility in a different way; they dare to and they've gotten courage to develop their own jobs. It really shows, and I think it also shows in their work well-being, that our sickness absences have really decreased a lot since I started here and I feel that for the first six months it was just substitutes ... Supervisor (nr 43).

It seems that this kind of leader support was also connected to individual-level motivation and well-being. On the team level, the cooperation and shared goal of developing team-level work according to the strengths of the team was important. Some subordinates also described the process as motivating. When the employees were able to use their strengths to develop their work, it gave them a feeling of meaningfulness and of having a voice.

Speaker 1: [creates enjoyment at work] Of course, at least always when you, like, succeed at something. Or if you get to develop something, for instance. It's not just developing for the sake of developing, but if we notice that something needs to be done somewhere, and then especially if you get to think about things with a group that's really eager and really come up with something and then get to try it out (...) Supervisor (nr 45).

To conclude, strength use on the individual level and team level are indeed linked, and the role of the leader is focal. If the leader was able to recognize and utilize strength use on an individual level, it also led to better functioning and equal team-level actions. The key to team-level use of individuals' strengths is linked to work climate and acceptance of diversity. On the team level, the use of different strengths should be seen as increasing the functionality of teams and the well-being of employees.

## 7. Discussion

The aim of this study was to determine whether leadership supports strength use at work at both individual and team levels. This study makes a valuable contribution to the field of strength use at work by confirming the multilevel nature of the phenomena (van Woerkom et al., 2022). We contribute to the leadership literature and highlight how leaders' coaching practices are essential conditional resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018) in organizational support of strength use at work at the individual and team level (Bond & Seneque, 2013; Yuan et al., 2019).

Our findings reveal that considering individual team members' characteristics and personal knowledge was crucial for leaders to effectively empower each employee to use their strengths for both their own individual good and that of their team. Thus, coaching leadership practices have the potential to support a positive resource accumulation process in a team (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018): first, by promoting each team members' personal resources (e.g., identifying individual strengths and developing skills) and second, by creating a work environment— a conditional resource—in which the personal resources of several people are coordinated to complement each other. Consistent with the recent literature on strength use at work (van Woerkom et al., 2022), highlighting the importance of team context for strengths use at work, we found a positive team climate and a sense of belongingness among team members is needed when strengths use at work is successful in individual and in team level. Moreover, it has been suggested that coordination of strengths use is needed (van Woerkom et al., 2022), especially when the moving from individual level of strengths use to team level strengths use at work, and our findings are providing evidence supporting that claim. Also, in line with earlier studies (Dwertmann & Boehm, 2016; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015), our study showed that leaders play a pivotal role in workplace climate

and its development. Through a positive work climate, the leader can effectively encourage their team to utilize their strengths for the collective benefit.

However, according to COR theory, a lack or loss of resources is more severe than gaining them (Demerouti et al., 2004; Hobfoll, 2001). Therefore, it is worth mentioning that, according to our interviewees, if the leader did not use coaching for strength use at work at all, or was perceived as using it with only some of their team members, this had negative consequences. Perceptions of inequality and conflicts in roles (e.g., someone else using power unofficially) were mentioned. That is not surprising; whereas a possibility to utilize one's strengths at work has found to be related to several positive outcomes, for instance reduced stress and burnout (Meyers et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2011), lack of that possibility is likely to lead to negative outcomes. However, earlier literature has not yet taken account the role of social comparison between team members concerning different possibilities for team members for strength use at work, and that is a novel viewpoint that our findings revealed. In addition, earlier literature is showing evidence that supervisors organizational agents who support individuals' strength use at work (Ding & Chu, 2020; Ding & Yu, 2021; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015) and we add to that knowledge by highlighting the negative effects that may follow if the leader is not taking agency or oversees the importance of coordination of strengths use at work (van Woerkom et al., 2022) equally among team members.

Although collegial team support for strength use has been found to be an important element in, for example, employees' willingness to improve organizational practices (Buljac-Samardžić et al., 2018), it seems that the leader's role is crucial in this process. For instance, if supervisor coaching in strength use at work was missing or inadequate, team members often failed to recognize the value of each team member's individual strengths. This often resulted in missed opportunities for cooperation and optimally sharing tasks and decreased commitment and increased intentions to leave the organization. Labor shortage is typical in elderly care organizations and the work itself is demanding (Audenaert et al., 2020; FIOH 2022; Sulander et al. 2016). Earlier literature (van Woerkom et al., 2016) has pointed out that organizational support of strength use at work is essential (Els et al., 2018; van Woerkom et al., 2022) as an especially important job resource in the context of high job demands (van Woerkom et al., 2016). Therefore, all the resources of an organization and each individual working there should be utilized and supported in order to compensate for the possible shortage of some resources and initiate resource caravan processes (Hobfoll et al., 2018), which is essential for individual well-being and positive organizational outcomes (Hakanen et al., 2011; Hobfoll, 2002).

This study also offers qualitative evidence that coaching leadership can promote strength use at work at both the individual and team level, thus expanding the traditional view of coaching leadership. Coaching leadership has so far mainly focused on individual level practices such as encouraging and facilitating each individual employee (Ellinger, 2013; Heslin et al., 2006; Yuan et al., 2019) on the basis of positive attitudes such as respect and trust in their capabilities and ability to develop (McCarthy & Milner, 2013). It has been shown that coaching leadership exploits an employee's potential, develops their abilities, and helps them learn (Bond & Seneque, 2013; Ellinger et al., 2008; Tanskanen et al., 2018; Yuan et al., 2019) and our findings show that this kind of leadership is very well enhancing strengths use at work. Coaching leadership has found to strengthen employees' willingness to offer their opinions on how to improve their organization and also behave accordingly (Wang et al., 2017; Yuan et al., 2019; Cui et al., 2021). In our study, especially coaching leadership tactics that focused on providing employees with a voice, and support of personal development and learning were found to be crucial to enable strength use at the individual level.

However, we suggest that in order to make the most of their teams and team members, autonomy had to be reinforced (Rapp-Ricciardi et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022) and positive team climate promoted through slightly different coaching practices than those used when coaching individual employees. For instance, asking for rather than providing readymade solutions and

answers (Ellinger, 2013) should be conducted not only in one-to-one discussions with individual team members but also as part of the team facilitation practices. In our study leaders' coaching was more invisible at the team level than the individual level, despite having to be intentional and active. The core of coaching leadership at the team level is understanding the leader as a scout for strength awareness among team members and the coordinator (van Woerkom et al., 2022) of a fair process that supports and enables team members' shared strength use at work.

### **7.1. Limitations and future research**

We now address the main limitations of the study and their implications for future studies in this field. Although the findings of this study provide valuable insights into strength use at work as a multi-level phenomena (van Woerkom et al., 2022) and its connection to coaching leadership (Bond & Seneque, 2013; Ellinger et al., 2008; Yuan et al., 2019), it is important to recognize its limitations. These limitations may impact the interpretation of the results and the generalizability of the findings beyond the scope of the study. First, when conducting a qualitative study, the subjectivity and role of the researcher should be considered. As qualitative analysis relies on the interpretation of data, the researchers' personal biases and assumptions may influence the results and analysis. However, in this study, analysis was not based on one single person and interpretations were discussed as a team. Different kinds of research designs should still be utilized in the future. For instance, longitudinal data collection and a multilevel source of data (both qualitative and quantitative) would be beneficial to better understand strength use at work as an individual- and a team-level phenomena. Also, collecting data on coaching leadership and other possible sources of organizational support of strength use at work would give us a better understanding of the best practices for supporting strength use at work. Moreover, the interview data on which this study was based was highly heterogeneous, consisting of mainly females and only one man, constituting 40 interviews in total. The data were also collected from one industry only: health care, and more specifically elderly care and in Finland. Therefore, some caution should be exercised when generalizing the results to other professions, industries, and countries. Moreover, and when assessing the significance of the results, the amount of data should be considered. Therefore, in the future the phenomena should also be studied in other contexts.

Further studies should investigate the possibilities of recognizing and enabling strength use on individual and team levels using, for example, diary studies (Ohly et al., 2010) and observations of work processes (Salmon, 2015), or should examine what technology can offer (Conte et al., 2023). The link between strength use and a more positive organizational culture and the quality of care provided to patients should also be studied in more detail.

In addition, coaching leadership is not the only possible leadership style that merits attention in the context of strength use at work. For instance, ethical leadership (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021) or servant leadership (Jiménez-Estévez et al., 2023) are potential approaches to study what kind of leadership may enhance strength use at work.

### **7.2. Practical implications**

Several practical implications can be drawn on the basis of our findings. First of all, strength use at work emerges as an important resource in a challenging work context: here, elderly care (Audenaert et al., 2020; Bakker & van Woerkom, 2018). Therefore, organizations should have practices for identifying and utilizing different strengths in their different processes. For instance, multilevel strength use at work should be considered part of human resource planning, in staffing and recruitment processes to identify newcomers' strengths and ensure their fit with the existing strengths in the team (van Woerkom et al., 2022). Appreciation of diversity and people at different career stages is also an important aspect of strength use at work. In addition to the likelihood of positive outcomes such as better well-being and performance at work (Els et al., 2018) of individuals and teams, it can also foster organizations' employer images, and help them commit their personnel, and attract new employees (Arasanmi & Krishna, 2019), which is especially important during labor shortages.

Because the coaching leadership style seems to be an essential organizational resource for strength use at work, organizations should support their supervisors' coaching skills through training and development. Development of both individual-oriented coaching practices and team-level coaching practices should be promoted and strength use at work should be part of these actions (Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020).

Moreover, supervisors themselves can develop their own work tasks that involve interaction with others, for instance, meetings and performance appraisals, and ensure that they involve the strength use perspective through coaching practices. Leaders should aim to obtain a good understanding of the work itself and identify the strengths that the team already has and those that are needed. It is also crucial that leaders recognize and acknowledge the impact of staffing challenges on workplace climate and promote a positive team climate through team-building exercises, open communication, and conflict resolution strategies.

Based on our findings, employees are themselves active agents in the process of strength use at work. Thus, in order to successfully use strengths at work as an individual and as a team member, the contribution of employees themselves is essential. Every member of the team should responsibly give their best and ensure that their own interests in utilizing strengths are fairly aligned with other team members' opportunities to use their strengths.

## 8. Conclusions

To conclude, this study offers important insights on the fields of coaching leadership and its relation to strength use at work. It was revealed that the leader has a pivotal role in the process of strength use at work through creating a positive work environment, as well as recognizing and utilizing the strength use of individuals and coordinating for team level use of individual strengths. Interestingly, the findings show that if the leader is unable to employ strength use, feelings of inequity and conflicts in team dynamics was experienced. Findings of this study offer qualitative evidence of coaching leadership and strength use not only on an individual level, but on a team level as well.

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