

The influence of line managers and HR department on employees' affective commitment

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Based on social exchange theory, we investigate the impact of HRM investments made by two important HR actors, i.e. line managers and the HR department, on employees' affective commitment. More specifically, we examine the independent and joint impact of three different independent variables: the line manager's enactment of HR practices, the line manager's relations-oriented leadership behaviour and the HR department's service quality. We contribute to existing literature in two ways. First, we pay attention to the HRM role of line managers, a topic largely neglected in SHRM research. Second, we focus on perceived HRM rather than intended HRM, because this is seen as the driver of employees' attitudinal and behavioural reactions. Data for this study were collected among 1363 employees (response rate 72%), working in three different service organizations. The results of a moderated regression analysis indicate that line managers can enhance employee affective commitment by both the effective enactment of HR practices and good relations-oriented leadership behaviour. High service quality by the HR department has an additional positive effect on employees' affective commitment. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

In strategic HRM (SHRM) literature, it is argued that HRM indirectly affects firm performance, through a causal chain of mediating variables such as employees' attitudes (e.g. commitment), employees' behaviour (e.g. turnover) and employees' performance (e.g. productivity) (Becker, Huselid, Pickus & Spratt, 1997; Guest, 1997; Ramsey, Scholarios & Harley, 2000; Wright & Nishii, 2006). Furthermore, recent theoretical frameworks emphasize that especially employees' perceptions of how and why HRM is implemented throughout the organization are important in steering attitudinal and behavioural reactions (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Nishii, Lepak & Schneider, 2008; Wright & Nishii, 2006). A useful theoretical framework that is called upon in this regard is social exchange theory (Blau, 1967). This theory states that there is a 'norm of reciprocity', meaning that when a person or entity does a favour for another, the recipient of the favour will feel a sense of obligation to reciprocate. Applied to SHRM research, the reasoning is that perceived investments in HRM can give employees the feeling that the organization values their contributions and cares about their

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well-being, which will cause employees to react with attitudes and behaviour that are beneficial to the organization (Gould-Williams, 2007; Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005; Hannah & Iverson, 2004; Paré & Tremblay, 2007; Whitener, 2001).

An often neglected fact in this regard is that there are different actors that implement HRM in the organization. 'HRM' is frequently held synonymous with 'the HR department' (Purcell & Kinnie, 2007), whereas line managers also have a substantial responsibility in the implementation of HR practices in most contemporary organizations (Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; Hall & Torrington, 1998; Reilly, Tamkin & Broughton, 2007; Thornhill & Saunders, 1998). Line managers' discretionary behaviour in applying HRM is even said to be critical for improving employee job satisfaction, commitment and subsequently extra-role behaviours (Harney & Jordan, 2008). This suggests that not only the HR department, but also line managers are important in establishing successful social exchange relationships in the organization. The purpose of this paper is to test whether this statement holds. We empirically investigate the impact of HRM investments made by two important HR actors, i.e. line managers and the HR department, on employees' affective commitment. More specifically, we examine the independent and joint impact of three different independent variables: the line manager's enactment of HR practices, the line manager's relations-oriented leadership behaviour and the HR department's service quality. The results will enhance our insights in the role and contribution of each HR actor, and provide input to align both actors' role and contribution. This paper also adds to SHRM literature by studying employee opinions on the HRM implementation by line managers and the HR department. In this way, we shift focus from the often studied intended HRM to the rarely studied perceived HRM (Grant & Shields, 2002; Khilji & Wang, 2006; Purcell & Kinnie, 2007).

The paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we first provide a literature overview of the HRM role of line management and the HR department. We also develop a set

of hypotheses regarding the independent and joint effect of the role of both HR actors in steering employees' affective commitment. Second, we describe our research design and specify the measures we used. In a third section, we present our results. Finally, we discuss the main findings together with implications for practice and future research.

Literature overview and hypotheses

Social exchange theory has recently been introduced in SHRM research, to explain the mediation mechanisms between HR practices on the one hand and employee and firm performance on the other hand (e.g. Nishii et al., 2008; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). According to Guzzo and Noonan (1994), HR practices are communications from the employer to the employee. They send signals regarding the extent to which the organisation is willing to invest in its employees, sees the employees as an important asset to attain added value in the organisation and cares for its employees' well-being. Positive perceptions of these HR practices will create an obligation within employees to react equitably, by showing positive attitudes and behaviour. Several authors have indeed shown a positive relationship between HR practices and affective commitment (e.g. Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005; Paré & Tremblay, 2007; Whitener, 2001). Thus far, in this research no specific attention has been paid to the different HR-actors that may be involved in implementing HRM in the organisation. The HR practices studied are considered to be organisational actions. However, it is widely acknowledged that line managers have become increasingly responsible for the actual implementation of a substantial amount of HR practices in the organization (e.g. Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; Hall & Torrington, 1998; Reilly, Tamkin & Broughton, 2007; Thornhill & Saunders, 1998). Opinions even differ in HR devolution literature on the role that is left for the HR department, next to the substantial HR role taken on by the line. The most extreme point of view is that the HR department loses its reason for existence by devolving its core tasks to line managers (Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; Kanter, 2003). A second position

is taken by authors who believe that devolving HR responsibilities to line managers creates new opportunities for the HR department to gain influence in the organization (e.g. Kulik & Perry, 2008). By transferring operational HR tasks to the line, valuable time is freed up to focus on the more strategic HR activities (Larsen & Brewster, 2003; Ulrich, 1998; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). These authors argue that regarding employees, the HR department should mainly operate from a second row, by advising and training the line managers (Gennard & Kelly, 1997; Hall & Torrington, 1998). Finally, some authors argue that even in a HR devolution context the HR department has an important direct role to play towards employees, which should mainly consist of guarding employee well-being against (line) management indifference (e.g. Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Francis & Keegan, 2006; Harris, 2007; Hope Hailey, Farndale & Truss, 2005; Renwick, 2003). A HR department only focusing on (strategic) process issues may be considered as only looking after the interests of management as opposed to the interests of the work force. In this case, employees may lose trust and confidence in the HR department as a partner advocating their needs at the highest management level in the organization (Francis & Keegan, 2006).

In this paper, we want to contribute to this debate by empirically examining the role and contribution of line managers and the HR department in strengthening employee affective commitment. We thus include both line managers and the HR department as potentially critical actors in establishing social exchange relationships. The conceptual framework of the paper is given in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

The HRM role of line managers

Both in the literature on managerial roles and in HR devolution literature authors claim a long-standing responsibility of line managers for people management issues. Mintzberg (1971), known for his work on managerial theory, denoted one of the ten managerial roles he

defined as the 'leader' role. In this role, the manager should motivate his subordinates, and develop the environment in which they work. Staffing activities are also seen by Mintzberg (1971) as part of the leader role. A lot of studies have used his managerial role model and recognize the people manager role (e.g. Luthans, Rosenkrantz & Hennessey, 1985; Pavett & Lau, 1983). Moreover, several authors from the HR devolution literature argue that these people management responsibilities have increased considerably in the last decades due to the emergence of HRM as opposed to personnel management, and the pressure on HRM to make a strategic contribution (e.g. Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; Hall & Torrington, 1998; Reilly et al., 2007; Thornhill & Saunders, 1998; Ulrich, 1997).

To contribute to the firm's strategy realization, line management responsibility for HRM is believed to be essential. After all, line managers occupy a central position in realizing core business objectives and might therefore have a more direct impact on their subordinates' motivation, commitment and discretionary behaviour as compared to the HR department (Poole & Jenkins, 1997; Andersen, Cooper & Zhu, 2007).

Despite the central role that is attributed to line managers in bringing about HRM's strategic contribution to the firm, only recently a case is made to include the HRM role of line managers in SHRM research (e.g. Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Gardner, Moynihan, Park & Wright, 2001; Purcell & Kinnie, 2007). According to Purcell and his colleagues (Purcell, Kinnie, Hutchinson, Rayton & Swart, 2003; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Purcell & Kinnie, 2007), this HRM role of line managers consists of a management component and a leadership component. Managing concerns the enactment of specific and formal HR practices that are the responsibility of the line manager, such as recruitment practices, performance appraisals and training activities. Leadership relates to the continuous display of a wide set of leadership behaviours (e.g. providing support to subordinates, consulting subordinates about important decisions, recognizing worthy contributions, etc.) aimed to influence employee attitudes and

behaviour and to give direction and structure with regard to the working lives of employees. Since both components influence employees' perceptions of how they are managed, and will thus impact on employee attitudes and behaviour (Wright & Nishii, 2006), both are needed to obtain an effective HRM implementation by line managers in the organization (Purcell & Kinnie, 2007; Yukl & Lepsinger, 2005). Therefore, in our paper we focus on both the line manager's enactment of HR practices (management), and relations-oriented leadership behaviour (leadership).

1. The line manager's enactment of HR practices

In most HRM-performance research, HRM is conceptualized as a set of HR practices developed by the HR department in an organization (Boselie, Dietz & Boon, 2005). Implicitly, uniformity in the impact of HR practices is assumed throughout the organization. However, Wright and Nishii (2006) draw our attention to the distinction that can be made between intended, implemented and perceived HR practices. Intended HR practices are those developed by HR policy makers to attain desired employee attitudes and behaviours, in order to contribute to the realization of the firm's strategy. Due to political, institutional and rational influences the actual HR practices that are executed in the firm rarely match the intended HR practices. One major cause of perceived differences in HR practices is the implementation of HR practices by various line managers (Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; Hall & Torrington, 1998; Thornhill & Saunders, 1998). The way in which line managers implement HR practices will differ according to the (varying) levels of competence, motivation and opportunity of these line managers (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg & Kalleberg, 2000; Delery & Shaw, 2001; Harney & Jordan, 2008; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Wright & Nishii, 2006). Consequently, employees' perceptions of the effectiveness of HRM implementation will depend on their line manager's effort and effectiveness, and these perceptions will have an influence on their affective commitment to the organization.

Affective commitment refers to the extent to which followers identify with, are involved in and are emotionally attached to an organization (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolnytsky (2002) indicated in their meta-analysis study on the antecedents, correlates and consequences of commitment, that work experiences have strong relationships with affective commitment. Employees will be more attached to the organization if they experience a supportive work environment (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson & Sowa, 1986). In this case, they feel obliged to react equitably to the organisation's or the organisational representatives' commitment (Blau, 1967). The effective execution of HR practices by the line manager may contribute to the experience of this supportive work environment (Macky & Boxall, 2007; Meyer & Smith, 2001; Wu & Chaturvedi, 2009). Effectively executing performance appraisals, giving feedback, offering training to execute the job more accurately and providing back up when a colleague falls sick will all give employees the feeling they are supported and encouraged by their line manager to execute their job effectively, now and in the future. In exchange, they will show positive attitudes and behaviour. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: if employees perceive an effective enactment of HR practices by their line manager, they will more likely display affective commitment to the organization.

2. The line manager's relations-oriented leadership behaviour

In order to facilitate theory and research on leadership effectiveness, several authors have tried to categorize the existing collection of leadership behaviours, resulting in a multitude of differing taxonomies (Yukl, Gordon & Taber, 2002). Two meta-categories of leadership behaviour that are often distinguished in literature are task-oriented leadership behaviour (concern for the groups' goals and the means to achieve the goals) and relations-oriented leadership behaviour (concern for human relations and maintaining friendly, supportive relations with the followers) (Bass, 1990). Examples are the 'initiating structure' and

'consideration' dimensions of the Ohio State Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) (Stogdill & Coons, 1957; Judge, Piccolo & Ilies, 2004) or the 'concern for production' and 'concern for people' dimensions of the managerial grid theory of Blake and Mouton (1982). Task-oriented leadership behaviour and relations-oriented leadership behaviour are not mutually exclusive. It is possible - and according to the managerial grid theory (Blake & Mouton, 1982) even preferable in terms of organizational effectiveness - for a leader to score high on both meta-categories. Yet, these meta-categories are clearly and theoretically distinct in terms of their effects and objectives (Yukl et al., 2002; Yukl, 2008). The primary objective of task-oriented leadership behaviour is to improve productivity and reduce costs. Relations-oriented leadership behaviour aims at building commitment, trust and cooperation among subordinates (Yukl et al., 2002; Yukl, 2008). In this paper, our focus is on line managers' influence on employees' affective commitment. Therefore we concentrate on the relations-oriented leadership behaviour of the line manager.

According to Yukl et al. (2002), relations-oriented leadership behaviour includes five specific leadership behaviour components: (1) supporting, i.e. acting considerate, showing sympathy and support when someone is upset or anxious, and providing encouragement and support when there is a difficult, stressful task; (2) developing, i.e. providing coaching and advice, providing opportunities for skill development, and helping people learn how to improve their skills; (3) recognizing, i.e. providing praise and recognition for effective performance, significant achievements, special contributions, and performance improvements; (4) consulting, i.e. checking with people before making decisions that affect them, encouraging participation in decision making, and using the ideas and suggestions of others; (5) empowering, i.e. allowing substantial responsibility and discretion in work activities, and trusting people to solve problems and make decisions without getting prior approval (Yukl et al., 2002, p. 25).

As mentioned before, affective commitment will be mostly influenced by work experience variables. An important work experience variable is the leadership behaviour of the line manager (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski & Rhoades, 2002). Since line managers act as organizational representatives, the extent to which they value their subordinates' contributions and care for their well-being will also partly be seen as an organisational accomplishment (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). This indication of organisational commitment will incite employees to show reciprocal dedication to the organisation (Blau, 1967). Since relations-oriented leadership behaviour implies the creation of a friendly and supportive work environment for employees (Bass, 1990), we argue that it will be conceived as a sign of organisational commitment and will have a positive impact on employees' affective commitment. We formulate our second hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis 2: if line managers are perceived to display effective relations-oriented leadership behaviour, employees will react by showing greater affective commitment to the organization.

The HRM role of the HR department

The desire to increase the credibility of the HR department as a valuable strategic or business partner often forms the rationale for the devolution of operational and people-oriented HR responsibilities to line managers (Francis & Keegan, 2006; Harris, 2007; Hope Hailey et al., 2005). However, several authors argue that the HR department should observe caution in pushing away the operational people-oriented role of employee advocate (Caldwell, 2008; Francis & Keegan, 2006; Graham & Tarbell, 2006; Harris, 2007; Simmons, 2003; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). As an employee advocate, the HR department should make sure the employer-employee relationship is one of reciprocal value by caring for, listening to, empathising with and responding to employees and their concerns (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). Neglecting this role may negatively impact on employees' sense of well-being and

commitment in the organization (Ulrich, 1997). By focusing only on strategic issues, the HR department loses direct contact with the employees and is no longer able to represent the employees' voice at the top management level. Employees will then lose trust and confidence in the HR department as a partner advocating their needs and maintaining a balanced employment relationship (Francis & Keegan, 2006; Harris, 2007; Hope Hailey et al., 2005). According to social exchange theory (Blau, 1967) these perceptions of a non-committed HR department will negatively impact employees' affective commitment. We argue that employees can deduce the extent to which the HR department values and cares for its employees (i.e. executes the employee advocate role properly) from looking at the extent to which the HR department gives evidence of reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance. These are dimensions of service quality defined by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988), that were already adapted to and used in a HR department context by several authors (e.g. Biemans, 1999; Delmotte, 2008; Nehles, van Riemsdijk & Looise, 2008). Reliability in a HR department context means the HR department performs its services accurately and keeps its promises. A reliable HR department does its best to seriously deal with employee questions and problems, thereby showing it cares for employee concerns. Responsiveness means the HR department is willing to help, and provides prompt service. As such, responsiveness is directly linked with responding to employees and their problems, one of the aspects in Ulrich and Brockbank's conceptualisation of the employee advocate role (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). Empathy concerns the ability and willingness of the HR department to take into account the individual feelings, needs and wishes of employees. According to Ulrich and Brockbank (2005), empathising with employees is one of the ways in which the HR department can ensure that the employer-employee relationship is one of reciprocal value. Finally, assurance is defined as the degree to which the HR department is able to inspire trust and confidence in employees, by being knowledgeable and credible. This

confidence is a prerequisite for a positive reciprocal employer-employee relationship (Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005). Based on the above reasoning, our third hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 3: if the HR department is perceived to provide high service quality, employees will display more affective commitment to the organization.

In addition, we assume that the HR department can in particular make a difference in influencing employees' affective commitment if the line manager is perceived to perform its HRM role poorly. Two concerns that are often raised in HR devolution literature are the unwillingness and inaptitude of several line managers to take on a HRM role (e.g. Cooke, 2006; Cunningham & Hyman, 1999; Maxwell & Watson, 2006; McGovern, Gratton, Hope Hailey, Stiles & Truss, 1997; Renwick, 2003; Renwick & MacNeil, 2002; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). Although unwillingness can be the consequence of a lack of personal motivation to execute HR tasks, it is often caused by a high operational workload and the domination of short-term operational pressures (McGovern et al., 1997; Cunningham & Hyman, 1999). The inaptitude of line managers to perform HR tasks is often produced by a lack of sufficient HR competencies (Harris, Doughty & Kirk, 2002; Maxwell & Watson, 2006). Both situations can lead to a minimalist and ineffective execution of the HRM role by line managers (McGovern et al., 1997; Harris, 2007). In addition, the consistency in HR policy and fair treatment of (all) employees may be affected (Harris, 2007). According to several authors, guarding this fair treatment, and acting as a neutral third party and mediator between employees and line managers is also an important part of the responsibility of the HR department as an employee advocate (e.g. Ellig, 1997; Francis & Keegan, 2006; Graham & Tarbell, 2006). We therefore finally hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4: perceptions of the HR department's service quality will buffer the effects of bad enactment of HR practices (H4a) or poor relations-oriented leadership behaviour (H4b) by the line manager on employees' affective commitment.

Methodology

Sample

The data we use come from an employee and line manager survey in the Belgian/Luxembourg divisions of three large international service companies. We will give a brief description of each organization and its HRM structure to elucidate the context in which the results of this study should be interpreted. The first company provides restaurant and retail services to travellers. In Belgium, this organization employs 1255 people. The HR department consists of nine people, all located in the Belgian headquarters. Employees are geographically spread out over 32 establishments in Belgium. In all but two of the cases, one line manager supervises each establishment. The line managers received a list of 26 HR tasks which are typically on the borderline of being an HR department responsibility or a line manager responsibility. The HR practices cover 8 HR content domains (personnel planning; recruitment, selection and introduction; well-being and security; training; career management; performance appraisal; reward management; and administration), and are based on previous studies (e.g. Cascón-Pereira et al., 2006; Hall & Torrington, 1998; Larsen & Brewster, 2003; Maxwell & Watson, 2006; McConville & Holden, 1999). The line managers of the first company indicated that they are - on average - at least partly responsible for the execution of 21 HR tasks. The second organization is the Belgian division of a European multi-service and staffing company. It has approximately 250 employees in 74 offices. An HR department of 4 people is located in the Belgian headquarters. At the head of each office is an office manager. On average, an office manager is at least partly responsible for the execution of 19 out of 26 HR tasks. The third organization is an IT services multinational which counts around 190 employees in Belgium

and Luxembourg. The HR department exists of 2 people and is located in the headquarters in Belgium. Line managers of the different branches in the organization declare to have at least a shared responsibility for an average of 22 of the 26 HR tasks on the list.

In conclusion, we can say that all three organizations are geographically dispersed, with a small HR department concentrated in the headquarters of the organization and a substantial devolution of HR responsibilities to the line managers of the different offices.

Data collection

For this study, we use employee survey data, which were gathered in the period June – October 2009. For practical reasons, some of the employees of the first organization received a paper copy of the questionnaire. All other employees filled in an on-line questionnaire. In organization one, 1112 employees were questioned (response rate of 69%). In the second organization, 142 employees were asked to participate (response rate of 87%). From the third organization, 109 employees were included in the survey (response rate of 87%). Overall, we collected data from 986 respondents. However, individuals who completed the survey in less than six minutes were excluded to diminish the occurrence of randomly selected answers, leading to a final usable sample of 929 employees.

Measures

Line manager's enactment of HR practices

The employees received a list of items regarding their line manager's enactment of the HR practices that are typically devolved to line managers. Two example items are: 'My direct supervisor takes care of a good introduction of new colleagues' and 'My direct supervisor responds to training needs in time'. Responses are given on a 5- point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (entirely disagree) to 5 (entirely agree). A 'not applicable' category was also provided for those cases where the employee was of the opinion that the line manager had no formal responsibility to execute that HR practice. A score of 0 was attributed to this category.

Consistent with a typical approach used in HRM-performance research (e.g. Becker & Huselid, 1998; Guthrie, 2001; Huang, 1997), we constructed an additive index by summing the effectiveness scores on the HR practices. The measure obtained was subsequently divided by the number of HR practices which the employee considered applicable to his/her line manager. In this way, the effectiveness score of line managers who are responsible for the enactment of only a few HR practices is comparable with the effectiveness score of line managers who are responsible for the enactment of all HR practices. The higher the index score, the more effective the line manager is thus perceived in the enactment of the HR practices he/she is responsible for according to the employee.

Line manager's relations-oriented leadership behaviour

The five relations-oriented leadership behaviour components defined by Yukl et al. (2002) - developing, empowering, consulting, supporting and recognizing - were investigated. We used an existing and validated leadership behaviour scale for each dimension. Developing leadership behaviour was measured using the developmental leadership scale of Rafferty and Griffin (2006). A sample item is: 'My supervisor encourages staff to improve their work-related skills'. Empowering leadership behaviour was represented by four items of the 'tolerance and freedom' dimension of the Leader Behaviour Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) (Stogdill, 1962). An example is: 'My supervisor permits us to use our own judgments in solving problems'. To measure consulting leadership behaviour, we relied on five items of the 'participative decision-making' scale of Arnold, Arad, Rhoades and Drasgow (2000). An example is: 'My supervisor encourages us to express ideas/suggestions'. Supporting leadership behaviour was assessed based on a 3-item supervisor support scale developed by House (1981) and modified by Yoon and Thye (2000). A sample item is: 'My supervisor can be relied on when things get tough on the job'. Finally, since we could not find a validated scale measuring recognizing leadership behaviour, we developed it ourselves.

Starting from the recognizing leadership behaviour definition of Yukl et al. (2002) (see supra, p.7) we constructed four items. Example items include: ‘My supervisor tells us when we perform well’ and ‘My supervisor makes sure we get the credit when we accomplish something substantial on the job’. To assure the content validity of this scale, the items were reviewed by 3 academic experts in the field of HRM and 3 HR managers. They evaluated the items on readability, clarity, relevance, and distinctiveness with regard to the other relational leadership behaviour dimensions. An exploratory factor analysis on the items of the newly developed scale, using principal axis factoring, clearly detained a one-factor solution (eigenvalue = 3.097, percentage of variance explained = 77%). The scale items, together with the factor loadings, are presented in Table 1. Coefficient alpha’s for the five relations-oriented leadership behaviour components are high (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994): developing leadership behaviour ($\alpha = 0.83$), empowering leadership behaviour ($\alpha = 0.86$), consulting leadership behaviour ($\alpha = 0.85$), supporting leadership behaviour ($\alpha = 0.76$) and recognizing leadership behaviour ($\alpha = 0.90$). Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (entirely disagree) to 5 (entirely agree).

Insert table 1 about here

To investigate how the different components relate to the general construct of relations-oriented leadership behaviour, we distinguished between three plausible scenarios. A series of confirmatory factor analyses were performed and compared in terms of goodness-of-fit to determine the most appropriate scenario (Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Kernis & Goldman, 2006). The first scenario says that although relations-oriented leadership behaviour may consist of conceptually distinct components, these are not empirically distinguishable due to high interrelations. In this case, a one-factor solution representing a general relations-oriented leadership behaviour construct should give the best goodness-of-fit results. The second scenario represents a situation where relations-oriented leadership behaviour is a

multidimensional construct, consisting of five different components. This scenario corresponds to a five-factor solution. Finally, in the third scenario it is assumed that the five components are conceptually distinct, but interrelated facets that are influenced by a general relations-oriented leadership behaviour construct. In factor analytic terminology this equates to a second-order factor analysis, with the five components being indicators of a latent relations-oriented leadership behaviour construct. The goodness-of-fit indices for the three scenarios are shown in Table 2. Based on the suggestions of Hu and Bentler (1998), we focus on four different goodness-of-fit indices: Bentler's (1990) comparative fit index (CFI), the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) and the χ^2 -difference test. The standard χ^2 test statistic is not taken into account because of its sensitivity to sample size (Marsh, Balla & McDonald, 1988; Hu & Bentler, 1998). The one-factor model provides a poor fit to the data according to the CFI (values close to 0.95 indicate good fit) (Hu & Bentler, 1998) and the RMSEA (values ≤ 0.08 indicate fair fit) (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Hu & Bentler, 1998). Only the SRMR is below the recommended value of 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1998). However, as compared to the one-factor model, the five-factor model shows a much better fit to the data ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1452.00$, $\Delta df = 47$, $p < 0.001$; and CFI=0.94, RMSEA = 0.074, SRMR = 0.038). The second-order factor model shows an equally good fit as compared to the five-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 2.36$, $\Delta df = 5$, not significant; and other goodness-of-fit indices almost identical to the ones of the five-factor model). This indicates that the more parsimonious second-order model should be preferred and supports the conception of relations-oriented leadership behaviour as a multidimensional construct, of which the components are related due to the existence of a higher order construct (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). The factor loadings for the second-order factor model are shown in Figure 2. They are all statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and higher than 0.40.

Insert table 2 and figure 2 about here

The HR department's service quality

To measure employees' perceptions of the HR department's service quality, we used four dimensions of the validated SERVQUAL instrument (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithaml, 1991). Considering the argument of Stafford and his colleagues that modifications to this instrument might be required to reflect the specific features of a particular setting (Stafford, Prybutok, Wells & Kappelman, 1999), we adapted the instrument to the context of the HR department delivering HR services. The four dimensions are: reliability, e.g. 'If the HR department promises to do something, it does so'; empathy, e.g. 'An employee that contacts the HR department is given individual attention'; responsiveness, e.g. 'The HR department provides a prompt service'; and assurance, e.g. 'At the HR department, people are in general courteous'. Empathy, responsiveness and assurance were measured by four items and reliability was measured by three items. All items were judged on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (entirely disagree) to 5 (entirely agree). Coefficient alpha's for the different dimensions - 0.73 for empathy, 0.79 for responsiveness, 0.70 for assurance and 0.67 for reliability - are acceptable (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). In the same way as we did for the relations-oriented leadership behaviour, we examined the dimensionality of the HR department service quality construct. Again, a one-factor model (all items of all dimensions loading on a single factor), a four-factor model (the items of the four dimensions each loading on a separate factor) and a second-order factor model (same as the four-factor model, but the interrelationships between the four factors are assumed to be caused by a higher order general service quality construct) were compared. In addition, a two-factor model was tested, exploring the possibility that some of the dimensions were not really distinct. Nehles et al. (2008) found that in a HR context only two separate factors could be retrieved from the SERVQUAL dimensions of reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance. In line with

their findings, we loaded the indicators of reliability and responsiveness on one factor and the indicators of empathy and assurance on a second factor.

The goodness-of-fit indices of the one-factor model and the two-factor model are shown in Table 3. The four-factor model and the second-order factor model were not retained, since the latent covariance matrix of these models turned out to be not positive definite due to a correlation greater than one between the latent variables of assurance on the one hand and empathy and reliability on the other hand. This indicates that the different constructs are not all statistically distinguishable, as was suggested by Nehles et al. (2008). However, since the two-factor solution did not provide a significantly better fit to the data than the one-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 3.03$, $\Delta df = 1$, not significant) we decided to select the more parsimonious one-factor model (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). The goodness-of-fit indices of this model satisfy the criteria set by Hu and Bentler (1998) and Browne and Cudeck (1993). We thus consider HR department service quality to be a one-dimensional construct in our analyses. This construct may have different facets, but they are not empirically distinguishable. The factor loadings of the HR department service quality construct are all statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and higher than 0.40 (see Figure 3). The coefficient alpha for the HR department service quality scale is 0.91.

Insert table 3 and figure 3 about here

Affective commitment

Affective commitment of the employee to the organization was measured with the revised affective commitment scale developed by Allen and Meyer (1990). Example items are: 'I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization' and 'I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization (reversed)'. The coefficient alpha of this scale is 0.83.

Control variables

Six demographic variables, which have been argued to influence affective commitment, were included as control variables. These variables are: gender, age, education, length of service in the organization, full-time or part-time employment and permanent or fixed-term contract (Meyer et al., 2002; Sanders, Dorenbosch & de Reuver, 2008).

Analyses

We examined the discriminant validity of our different constructs - the line manager's enactment of HR practices, the line manager's relations-oriented leadership behaviour and the HR department's service quality - using confirmatory factor analysis. We developed and tested three models (Bentler & Bonett, 1980): 1) a model in which the indicators of the different constructs loaded on a single factor, 2) a model in which the indicators loaded on their hypothesized factors (with the index for the line manager's enactment of HR practices being a single indicator factor), and 3) a model in which the indicators of the two line management constructs loaded on a single factor, and the indicators of the HR department construct loaded on a second factor. The results, given in Table 4, show that the three factor model provides a significantly better fit to the data than the other two models. The goodness-of-fit indices of this model meet the conventional standards for good model fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Hu & Bentler, 1998).

Insert table 4 about here

Next, a moderated regression analysis was executed in Mplus to determine the independent and joint effects of the line manager's enactment of HR practices, the line manager's relations-oriented leadership behaviour and the HR department's service quality on employees' affective commitment. The independent variables were mean-centered before calculating the product terms that represent the interactions (Aiken & West, 1991). We took into account the nested structure of our data (employees of multiple teams within three

organizations were questioned) and controlled for the non-independence of our observations to obtain accurate parameter estimates and standard errors (Stapleton, 2002).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are reported in Table 5. Perceptions of the line manager's enactment of HR practices ($r=0.52$, $p<0.001$), the line manager's relations-oriented leadership behaviour ($r=0.50$, $p<0.001$) and the HR department's service quality ($r=0.48$, $p<0.001$) are all positively related with the affective commitment of the employee. The correlation between line managers' enactment of HR practices and line managers' relations-oriented leadership behaviour is rather high ($r=0.83$, $p<0.001$). However, the discriminant validity analyses provided support for the separate treatment of both constructs. Furthermore, the variance inflation factor values, indicating potential multicollinearity problems, ranged from 1.02 to 3.96 and were thus below the recommended cut-off value of 10 (Hair, Anderson, Tatham & Black, 1998) and even below the more stringent cut-off value of 5 (Craney & Surles, 2002).

Insert table 5 about here

Table 6 summarizes the moderated regression results. In the first model, only the control variables are included. Only 3% of the variance in affective commitment scores is explained by these variables. However, we notice a significant positive effect of the employee's age on his affective commitment ($\beta=0.16$, $p<0.01$) and a significant negative effect of being part-time employed on affective commitment ($\beta=-0.07$, $p<0.05$). This is in line with earlier research findings (e.g. Meyer et al., 2002; Sanders et al., 2008). In the second model, the independent effects of the line manager's enactment of HR practices, the line manager's relations-oriented leadership behaviour and the HR department's service quality on employees' affective commitment are tested. It appears that employee perceptions of an effective enactment of HR practices by their line manager ($\beta=0.19$, $p<0.01$), employee perceptions of effective relations-

oriented leadership behaviour by the line manager ($\beta=0.20$, $p<0.001$) and employee perceptions of high service quality by the HR department ($\beta=0.27$, $p<0.001$) all have a positive and significant impact on the employee's affective commitment. Our hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 are thus confirmed. The inclusion of two interaction effects in the third model, between the line manager's enactment of HR practices and the HR department's service quality on the one hand and the line manager's relations-oriented leadership behaviour and the HR department's service quality on the other hand, did not increase the explained variance of the model and the interaction terms had no significant effect on the employee's affective commitment. Hypothesis 4a and hypothesis 4b are not confirmed.

Insert table 6 about here

Discussion

In this paper, we investigated the role of line managers and the HR department as important representatives of the organisation in the establishment of social exchange relationships. Our results indicate that both HR actors have a significant role to play in steering employees' affective commitment to the organization. Line managers seem to have the strongest influence. The sum of the effects of both components of the line manager's HRM role (management ($\beta=0.19$); leadership ($\beta=0.20$)) is higher as compared to the effect of the HR department's service quality ($\beta=0.27$). We did not find evidence of an interaction effect between the roles of both actors. This suggests that line managers and the HR department have a distinct, independent role in HRM implementation towards employees.

These findings need to be interpreted within the context of the firms we studied. This study was carried out in three service organizations with geographically dispersed establishments, in which line managers have a significant responsibility for the enactment of HR practices. In addition, a central HR department is located in the Belgian headquarters of these organizations. The employees in our sample are often located at a distance of the HR

department, both geographically and structurally. As a consequence, it may be no surprise that line managers exercise a stronger influence on employees' affective commitment than the HR department. This is in line with suggestions from other researchers (e.g. Becker et al., 1997; Chen, Tsui & Farh, 2002) that proximal factors in the organization (e.g. the supervisor) might influence employees more than distal factors (e.g. top or HR management). However, because of the significant effect of the HR department's service quality on employees' affective commitment, the HR department seems to have an important people-oriented role, even in the case of a distant HR department and devolution of HR tasks to line managers.

The lack of an interaction effect might be explained by the type of HRM structure in the organisations of our sample. It is possible that in a setting where there is closer contact and collaboration between line managers and the HR department, for example in the case of decentralized HR generalists, the HR department can act as a substitute for the poor enactment of HR practices or relations-oriented leadership behaviour by a line manager.

Implications for practice

From our results, it seems that if line managers engage themselves to take on their HRM role, they can be a powerful partner of the HR department in enhancing commitment, and eventually individual and firm performance. However, as expected, the HR department also has an important HRM role towards employees. Based on our results, we encourage the HR department to maintain direct contact with the employees. In an urge to play a more important strategic role in the organization, the HR department may be tempted to transfer all people-oriented HR responsibilities to line managers. However, the alienation of the HR department from the employees prevents the HR department to build up trust relationships with employees, which may have a negative impact on employee commitment. Furthermore, since the line manager's enactment of HR practices and relations-oriented leadership behaviour turn out to have a substantial influence on employee commitment, another important role for the

HR department may be to support, advise, and motivate line managers in their HR work. Since line managers are no HR specialists, knowledge of HR practices and procedures, or leadership skills, may be lacking (Nehles, van Riemsdijk, Kok & Looise, 2006). In order to optimize the positive effects on employee commitment, it may be useful to develop and train HR and leadership skills. However, HR competence alone might not be enough. By means of institutional incentives (e.g. enactment of HR tasks is taken into account in the performance appraisal of the line manager) and practical advice and support (e.g. giving understandable information on HR policies, backing up the line manager in case of a difficult situation), the HR department can also motivate line managers to perform their HR tasks.

Limitations and directions for future research

Our data are self-reported and were collected at a single point in time. To investigate the potential influence of common method variance, Harman's single-factor test was conducted (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). Subjecting all items (of affective commitment, HR enactment, leadership behaviour and service quality) to an EFA clearly revealed separate factors which indicates that common method bias will only have a limited effect. Moreover, according to Doty and Glick (1998) validated scales are less sensitive to common method bias.

Furthermore, because we used cross-sectional data, we can not rule out the possibility of reversed causality: employees who display greater affective commitment may subsequently be more positive in their evaluations of their line manager's enactment of HR practices and relations-oriented leadership behaviour and in their evaluations of the HR department's service quality. To rule out this alternative explanation, longitudinal data on this topic are needed.

Next, our data are clustered at the organization level. They were gathered from three different organizations, but with a similar HRM structure (see supra). To be able to fully generalize these results it would be useful to carry out a more extensive survey, in which

organizations with different types of HRM structure are included. In each of these settings the relationship between the HR department, line managers and employees will be different. Therefore, the most optimal partnership between line management and HR department in terms of steering employees' affective commitment might be different as well. Future research may also look into the roles other important HR actors (e.g. external HR service providers, HR consultants, shared service centers, expertise centers, embedded HR generalists, ...) can play in steering employee attitudes and behaviour. For example, in organizations with 'embedded' or decentralized HR generalists, it may be interesting to study the interplay between corporate HR, local HR generalists and line managers. In addition, we looked at the Belgian/Luxembourg divisions of what are in fact very large international organizations. What we considered to be the central HR department can, if we look at a higher level, be regarded as a decentralized HR department in the international structure of the organization. The HR departments we studied will thus probably not be completely independent in taking HRM decisions and determining which role they play. In future research, it might be interesting to take these hierarchical relationships into account and to examine their influence on the effectiveness of HRM implementation in the organization.

In this study we looked upon the employee advocacy role of the HR department (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). It may be interesting to extend our focus to the advisory and support role of the HR department towards line management, and more specifically to examine whether high-quality advise and support creates an important leverage for line management's HR enactment. Moreover, strong support by the HR department may also signal to line managers the importance of high-level performance in their HR tasks (thereby contributing to employees' affective commitment).

Instead of only focusing on the advisory role of the HR department, one could go one step further and examine whether strong HRM systems can contribute to sharpening the

ability, motivation and opportunity of line managers to perform their HRM role well. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) argue that a strong HRM system is high in distinctiveness, consistency and consensus. Consequently, unequivocal messages are sent to the employees, but also to the line managers, about the behaviour that is valued and rewarded in the organization. These clear messages will make line managers more confident about what is important in HRM and which HR interventions are expected from them, thereby increasing their feeling of mastery and ability. Also, by making it more easy to recognize the importance and relevance of HRM, line managers may become more motivated to perform their HR tasks. Furthermore, an HRM system scoring high on consensus will give line managers the feeling that they are fully supported in their HR work, which will increase the feeling that they have the resources and opportunity to perform their HR work. From this point of view, we hypothesize that if line managers perceive the HRM system to be strong, they will be more likely to take care of their HRM role.

Finally, future research might focus on moderating variables in the relationships we studied. It is possible, for example, that the importance of the HR department increases when the span of control of line managers becomes larger or when the social climate in the organization is bad. In both cases, the quality of interpersonal relationships between line managers and employees might decrease. Consequently, the role of the HR department as a neutral party within the organization might become more important. The type of occupational category might also play a role. Our present results on the relative importance of line management versus HR department were obtained in traditional service organizations. Future research might look into the generalisation towards occupational groups in professional organizations or manufacturing firms, each characterized by different relationships of authority. For example, highly-educated and 'self-directed' professionals in hospitals or universities might rely more on supervisor-independent and individual career oriented HR

services, whereas the emphasis on hierarchical control and discipline towards blue collar workers might translate in line managers being the sole HR actor visible.

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Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

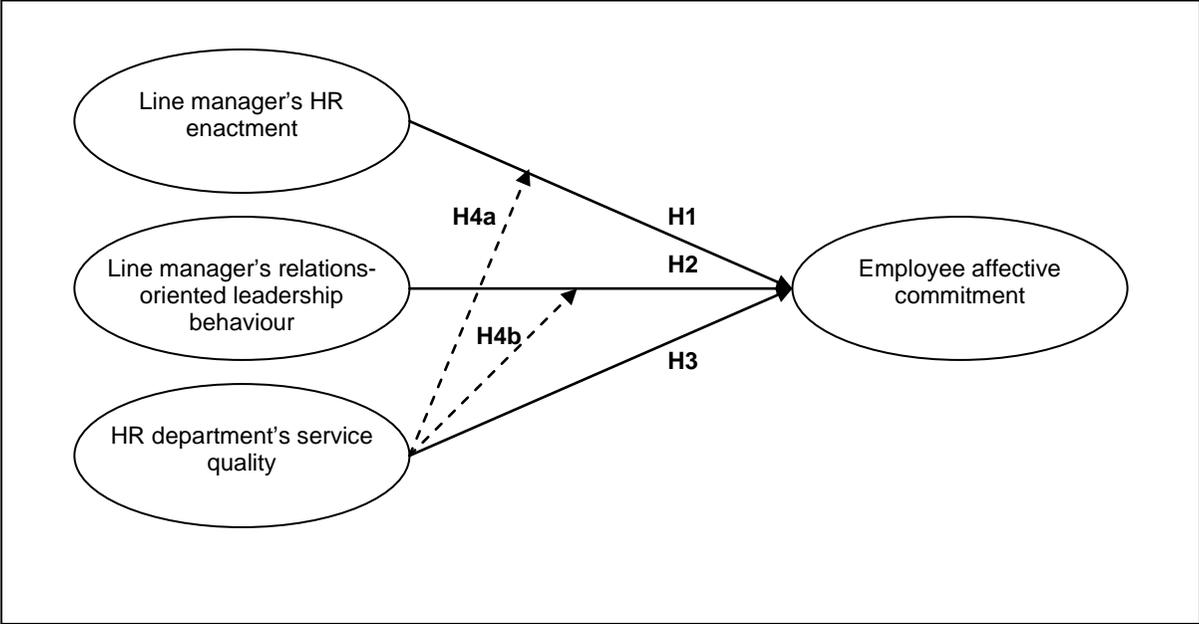


Table 1. Exploratory Factor Analysis results for recognizing leadership behaviour.

Item	factor loading
My supervisor makes sure we get the credit when we accomplish something substantial on the job	0.87
My supervisor takes pride in our accomplishments at work	0.89
My supervisor pays attention to our efforts	0.90
My supervisor tells us when we perform well	0.86
Final construct: Recognizing leadership behaviour (coefficient alpha: 0.90)	

Note: the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy is 0.84. According to Kaiser (1974), $0.80 < MSA < 0.90$ denotes that the appropriateness of the correlation matrix for EFA is 'meritorious'.

Table 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis results for relations-oriented leadership behaviour: goodness-of-fit indices.

Model	df	χ^2	Δdf	$\Delta \chi^2$	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
1. One-factor model	189	2297.04***			0.86	0.110	0.053
2. Five-factor model	142	845.04***			0.94	0.074	0.038
<i>model 2 versus model 1</i>			47	1452.00***			
3. Second-order factor model	147	847.40***			0.94	0.073	0.038
<i>model 3 versus model 2</i>			5	2.36			

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

*** $p < 0.001$

Table 3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis results for HR department service quality: goodness-of-fit indices.

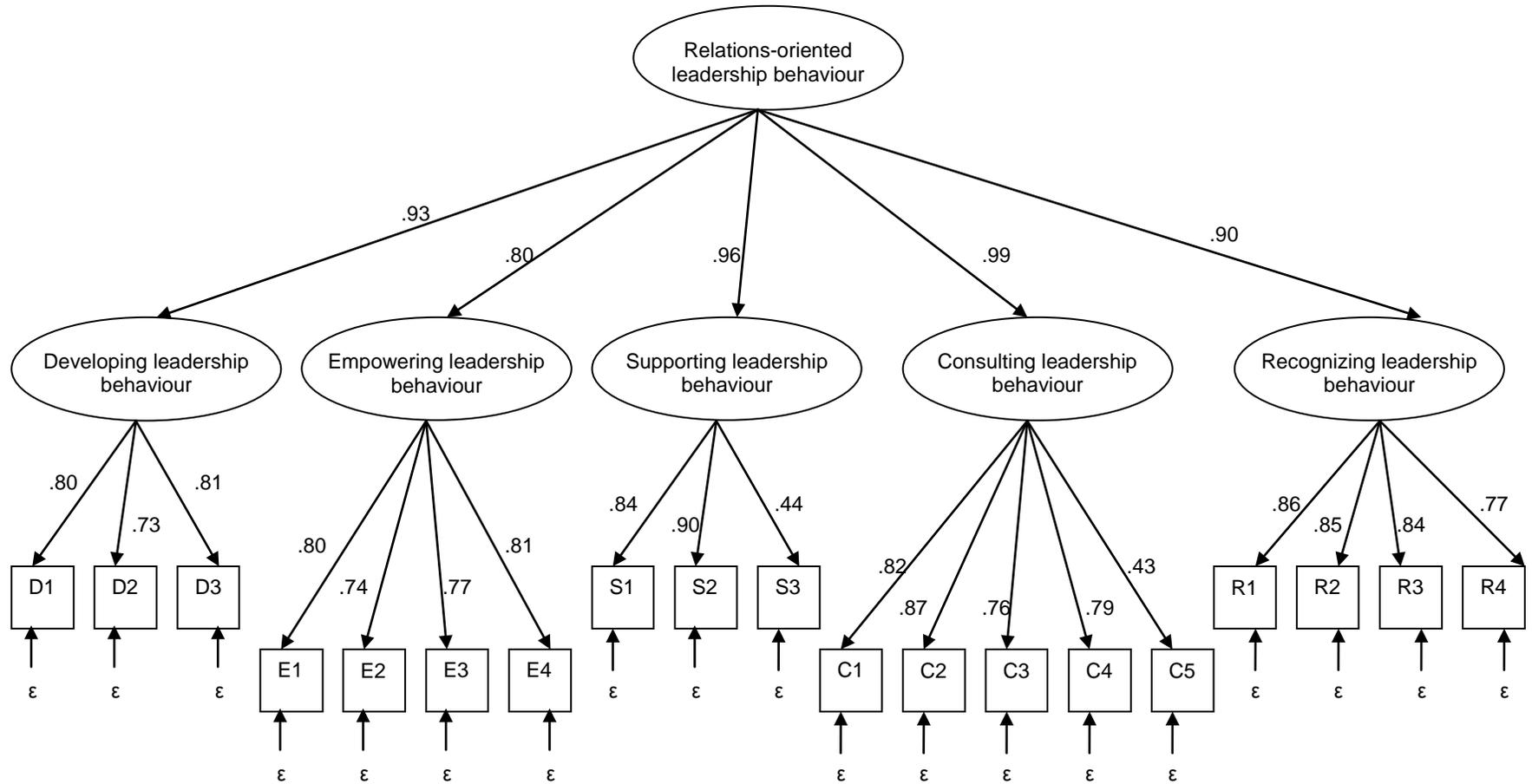
Model	df	χ^2	Δdf	$\Delta \chi^2$	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
1. One-factor model	90	503.97***			0.93	0.071	0.040
2. Two-factor model	89	500.94***			0.93	0.071	0.039
<i>model 2 versus model 1</i>			1	3.03			

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

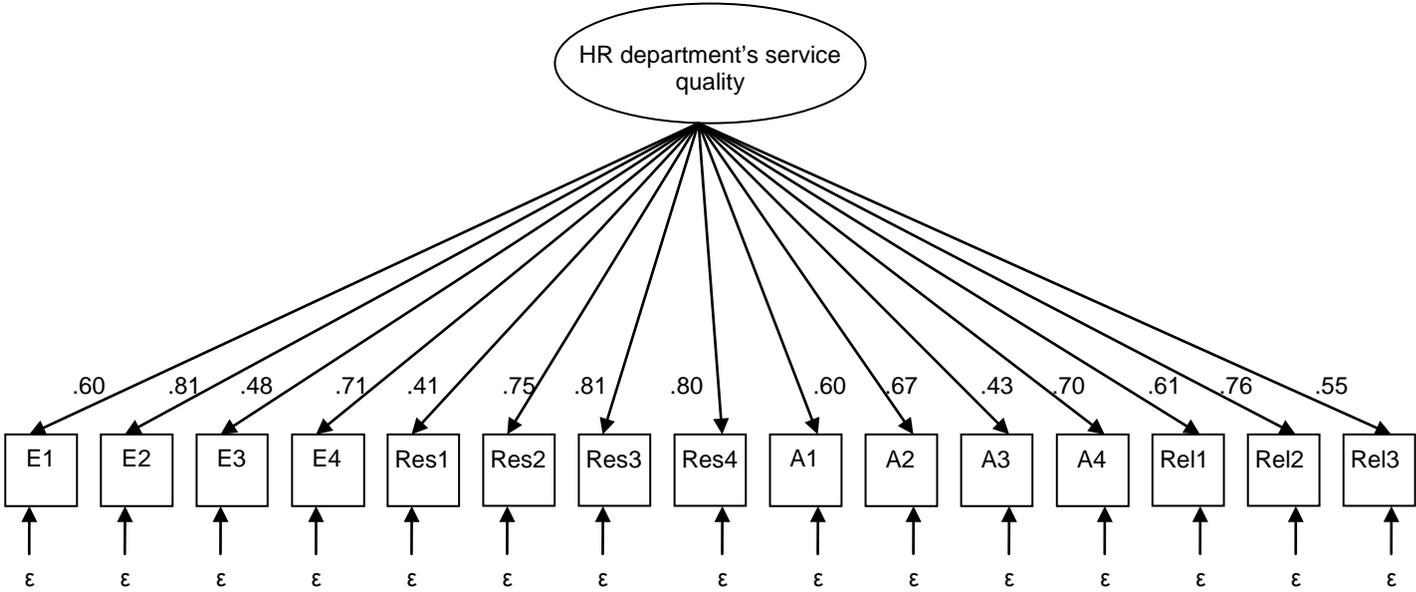
*** $p < 0.001$

Figure 2. Second-order Confirmatory Factor Analysis results for relations-oriented leadership behaviour: factor loadings.



Note: D = Developing leadership indicator, E = Empowering leadership indicator, S = Supporting leadership indicator, C = Consulting leadership indicator, R = Recognizing leadership indicator

Figure 3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis results for HR department service quality: factor loadings.



Note: E = Empathy indicator, Res = Responsiveness indicator, A = Assurance indicator, Rel = Reliability indicator

Table 4. Discriminant validity results.

Model	df	χ^2	Δ df	$\Delta \chi^2$	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
1. One-factor model	189	3636.25***			0.68	0.141	0.099
2. Two-factor model	188	885.57***			0.94	0.063	0.041
<i>model 2 versus model 1</i>			1	2750.68***			
2. Three-factor model	187	877.67***			0.94	0.063	0.040
<i>model 3 versus model 2</i>			1	7.90**			

*p<0.05

**p<0.01

***p<0.001

Table 5. Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Line manager's enactment of HR practices	6.98/10	1.72	1			
2. Line manager's relations-oriented leadership behaviour	6.34/10	2.12	0.83***	1		
3. HR department's service quality	6.20/10	1.72	0.52***	0.54***	1	
4. Affective commitment	5.96/10	2.09	0.52***	0.50***	0.48***	1

*p<0.05

**p<0.01

***p<0.001

Table 6. Regression results (dependent variable = affective commitment).

	Model 1 stand. β 's	Model 2 stand. β 's	Model 3 stand. β 's
Intercept	2.37	2.57	2.57
Age	0.16**	0.13**	0.13**
Sex = female	0.03	0.02	0.02
Length of service in the organization	-0.07	-0.01	-0.01
Part-time employment	-0.07*	-0.06	-0.06
Permanent contract	0.03	0.01	0.01
Level of education (ref. category = lower secondary education)			
higher secondary education	-0.01	-0.02	-0.02
higher education	-0.08	-0.10*	-0.10*
Line manager's enactment of HR practices		0.19**	0.20**
Line manager's relations-oriented leadership behaviour		0.20***	0.19**
HR department service quality		0.27***	0.27***
Enactment of HR practices*HR department service quality			0.05
Relations-oriented leadership behaviour*HR department service quality			-0.04
R ²	0.03*	0.34***	0.34***
Δ R ²		0.31***	0.00
F	3.92***	45.95***	38.37***

*p<0.05

**p<0.01

***p<0.001

Note: Standardizations in Mplus are done to unit variance, not zero means. Therefore the standardized intercept is not zero.