



## Article

# Building Employee Engagement and Resilience Through Strengths-Based Leadership

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## Abstract

Modern careers are enacted in turbulent and stressful environments and workers face increasing uncertainty in navigating their careers. Therefore, it is essential to support workers in coping with stress by enhancing their resilience. We propose that strengths-based leaders help their workers to find their own unique pathway to developing resilience by building upon their pre-existing strengths. In turn, we propose that resilience allows workers to transform the support and opportunities provided by their strengths-based leader into the active state of work engagement. We conducted a two-wave time-lagged survey among a representative sample of 1,095 Dutch employees. Results of our structural equation modelling indicated that T1 strengths-based leadership was positively related to T2 employee work engagement and that T2 employee resilience mediated the relationship between strengths-based leadership (T1) and employee work engagement (T2). We conclude that strengths-based leadership might be a tool to develop a resilient and engaged workforce and make suggestions for developing strengths-based leadership.

**Keywords:** leadership; resilience; strengths; strengths-based leadership; work engagement

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Due to developments related to technology, globalization, the economy, and changing workplace demographics, modern careers are enacted in turbulent and stressful environments (Mishra & McDonald, 2017). Almost half of the workers in Europe indicate that they are exposed to stressors such as time pressure, work overload, poor communication or cooperation, or a lack of control over work processes, resulting in serious occupational health problems (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2022). Although stressors at the workplace need to be reduced as much as possible, it is just as essential to support workers in coping with the amount of stress that is sometimes unavoidable, thereby enhancing their resilience (Kašpárková et al., 2018). Resilient employees have the psychological capacity to “bounce back” in the face of adversity (Luthans, 2002), something that is indispensable in today’s workplaces that are characterized by rapid changes, high workload, and rising burnout numbers (Demerouti et al., 2021). The surge of interest in resilience training and interventions in the workplace is therefore not surprising. Yet, the effectiveness of the most often used resilience building interventions – i.e., group level classroom training and computerized training – is limited (Joyce et al., 2018). Moreover, meta-analytic evidence also shows that the effects of resilience enhancing programs diminish over time (Vanhove et al., 2015), questioning how sustainable the effects of these trainings

really are. Together, these findings raise the question how organizations can best invest in their employees’ resilience.

Rather than temporarily investing in employee’s resilience through training in the hope that the effects will last, leaders may play a more sustainable role in creating a resilient workforce. Specifically, strengths-based leaders who help their subordinates to identify, use, and develop their strengths (Ding & Yu, 2022) could enhance their subordinates’ capacity to recover when dealing with challenges. When workers feel appreciated for their distinct attributes and feel supported to use and develop their unique strengths at work this boosts their self-esteem, which compensates for the negative impact of stress appraisal on employees’ self-esteem (Cohen & Wills, 1985). When employees feel supported to use their strengths, they are also likely to feel more authentic (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), resulting in higher levels of resilience (Sheldon et al., 1997).

To date most studies have investigated how resilience reduces indicators of ill-being, such as anxiety, depression, and stress (Robertson et al., 2015). However, since well-being does not necessarily emerge when ill-being is diminished (Gibbs et al., 2022; Keyes, 2002; Ryff et al., 2006), we focus on the role of resilience in enhancing employees’ work engagement – i.e., their levels of energy, dedication, and immersion (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). In line with job-demands resources theory (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti et al., 2001) we argue that resilience may act as a personal resource that allows employees to fully immerse themselves in their work.

With this paper, our aim is to contribute to the career literature. Because workers face an increasing uncertainty in navigating their careers (Lyons et al., 2015), we want to investigate a sustainable way of creating a resilient and engaged workforce. Previous studies have

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pointed out that to enhance resilience, one-on-one resilience training seems to be the most effective intervention, but also the intervention that is least likely to be used, possibly because it is time and money consuming (Joyce et al., 2018). In addition, investing in expensive one-on-one training is questionable, because its effects have been shown to diminish over time (Vanhove et al., 2016). We propose that leaders, who interact with employees on a regular basis, play a crucial role when it comes to investing in a sustainably resilient and engaged workforce.

Our second contribution is to the strengths-based leadership literature. Since individual strengths can serve as protective factors that heighten the likelihood of favorable career results and mitigate the risks associated with the uncertainty and constant change in modern careers (Di Fabio, 2014), leaders who are able to capitalize on workers' strengths are essential for promoting healthy careers. Research on strengths-based leadership is in its early stages and with our study we contribute to its expanding nomological net. Taking a resource perspective, we use a time-lagged research design to study the resource-building potential of strengths-based leaders and test whether employee resilience may explain the relation between strengths-based leadership and employee work engagement.

#### *Strengths-Based Leadership and Employee Work Engagement*

Strengths-based leaders help employees to identify, use, and further develop their strengths (Wang et al., 2023). While it is a relatively new construct within the positive, person-centered literature, strengths-based leadership (SBL) has discriminant validity over related leadership constructs such as authentic, transformational, and humble leadership (Ding et al., 2020). Theoretically, SBL goes beyond authentic and humble leadership with its focus on using and developing employees' strengths rather than solely knowing and appreciating employees' strengths (Owens & Hekman, 2012; Walumbwa et al., 2008). And while transformational leaders are focused on employees' needs, their focus is not necessarily on employees' strengths (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004).

Although different employees are likely to have different signature strengths – i.e., their most prominent characteristics that enable them to achieve their personal best performance and that are authentic and energizing to them (Linley & Harrington, 2006; Wood et al., 2011) – it benefits both the individual and the organization when employees use their strengths. More specifically, research shows that employee strengths use positively relates to personal growth initiative, goal attainment, and job performance, and negatively relate to stress and sickness absenteeism (Botha & Mostert, 2014; Linley et al., 2010; van Woerkom, Bakker, et al., 2016; van Woerkom, Mostert, et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2011). Yet, employees need help to first identify and consequently use their strengths because of their natural inclination to focus on weaknesses rather than strengths, also known as the negativity bias (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Strengths-based leaders can help identify employees' strengths by observing their behavior and having discussions about their strengths. Strengths can be recognized when an employee shows energy, engagement and a rapid learning curve when using the strength, prioritizes tasks that require the use of their strength, and repeatedly achieves success when using their strength (Linley et al., 2007).

However, even when employees are –or are made- aware of their strengths, they do not automatically use them at work (Buckingham, 2010). Strengths-based leaders again play an important role in providing employees the opportunities to use and further develop their strengths, for example by assigning tasks that fit employees'

strengths or redistributing tasks within a team to optimally use the strengths of different team members. Also, leaders can play a key role in guiding employees to develop the optimal usage of their strengths, for example by helping them to identify a character strength that may help to temper or manage an overused strength, or to identify a prominent strength to boost up another lesser developed strength (Niemic, 2019).

We take a resource perspective to argue that employees will feel more energetic, dedicated to their work, and immersed in their work when working with a strengths-based leader. Specifically, based on the job-demands-resources (JD-R) theory (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker et al., 2023), we expect that strengths-based leadership will elevate employees' work engagement because playing to one's strengths at work is a positive work experience that is energizing and exciting to the user (Linley & Harrington, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; van Woerkom, Oerlemans, et al., 2016). Additionally, by supporting and helping employees to use their strengths, strengths-based leaders create a work environment in which employees feel more competent and intrinsically motivated (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; van Woerkom, Bakker, et al., 2016), making it likely that they feel more engaged in their work. Furthermore, when employees are recognized for their strengths, supported in using and developing their strengths, and coached by their leader in the whole process of strengths identification, utilization, and development, the leader acts as an important job resource, thereby contributing to their employees' work engagement (Christian et al., 2011). Based on our reasoning we argue that:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Strengths-based leadership at T1 positively affects employee work engagement at T2.

#### *Strengths-Based Leadership, Employee Resilience, and Work Engagement*

Drawing upon resource theories (Demerouti et al., 2001; Hobfoll, 2011), we hypothesize that strengths-based leadership will not only have a direct, but also an indirect effect on employees' work engagement, by bolstering personal resources in the form of fostering resilience. In general, resilience denotes the capacity to bounce back from and adapt in the face of stressful experiences (e.g., Masten, 2001). The stress-coping model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) posits that individuals' responses to stressful events depend on their primary assessment of the potential threat posed by the situation coupled with their secondary evaluation of their capabilities and resources to effectively navigate it. Therefore, a situation becomes stressful only when individuals perceive its challenges to go beyond their coping abilities and resources (van der Meer et al., 2018).

An individual's secondary appraisal relies on two pivotal components of psychological resilience: Self-confidence, which involves trust in oneself, and self-efficacy, which pertains to positive beliefs regarding adaptive coping with stressful situations (van der Meer et al., 2018). Both components have been linked to favorable outcomes after stressful events (Bonanno et al., 2002; Bonanno et al., 2005; Major et al., 1998; Schok et al., 2010).

Resources do not exist in isolation and often come in caravans (Hobfoll, 2011), whereby the possession of resources is likely to result in an accumulation of resources. Strengths-based leaders can be the instigators of employees' resource growth because they provide key resources such as support, recognition, and coaching, which may consequently stimulate the development of employees' resilience. Strengths-based leaders' provisions of resources help employees to handle their job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018), which increases their confidence in their ability to handle

stressful situations. More specifically, when leaders assist their employees in identifying their unique strengths, this can foster employees' resilience because several strengths are empirically correlated with resilience and might therefore serve as a foundation for resilience (Padesky & Mooney, 2012). For example, when faced with difficulties, workers who have a strength in social intelligence may be able to recruit help from others, whereas workers with a strength in self-regulation will be able to remain calm, and creative persons may be able to come up with out of the box solutions. So instead of suggesting that there is one pathway to develop resilience and teaching workers new skills, thoughts or emotional reactions, strengths-based leader can help their workers to find their own unique pathway to developing resilience by building upon their existing strengths (Padesky & Mooney, 2012). Furthermore, strengths-based leaders can also raise their workers awareness of how they already make use of these strengths to be resilient in other domains of their life, for example in their role as a parent or in leisure activities, which has shown to be crucial for building and strengthening resilience (Padesky & Mooney, 2012).

Additionally, by motivating employees to use and further develop their strengths, strengths-based leaders provide mastery experiences that lead to increased feelings of competence, confidence, and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), which makes people more perseverant and confident in trying different strategies to solve their problems (Lorsbach & Jinks, 1999) and exert greater effort to master challenges (Locke & Latham, 1990).

Furthermore, we expect that resilience is positively related to employee work engagement. According to JD-R theory (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker et al., 2023), personal resources such as resilience stimulate employees' personal growth and development and as such, allow employees to feel invigorated and intrinsically motivated to perform their work (for a meta-analysis see e.g., Halbesleben, 2010). Additionally, resilient employees are confident that they are able to reach their goals, and this concordance between goals and the ability to reach these goals (Judge et al., 2005), contributes to employees' feelings of engagement in their work (Xanthopoulou et al., 2013). Taken together, we expect that:

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Employee resilience at T2 mediates the relation between strengths-based leadership at T1 and employee work engagement at T2.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

For the data collection we collaborated with the HappinessBureau, a Dutch organization that adopts an evidence-based approach to measure and enhance workplace happiness. In collaboration with one of the authors, this organization set out a two-wave time-lagged (six weeks) survey among Dutch employees and distributed the online questionnaire through a panel called PanelClix<sup>1</sup>. People who are a member of the panel can choose to participate in a questionnaire if they meet the requirements and earn credits that they can exchange for money. Those who were self-employed and as such, have no direct supervisor were excluded from participation in the survey. In total, 1,095 employees filled out the questionnaires at both time points. Of these participants, 556 were male (50.8%) and 539 were female (49.2%). On average, participants were 43.87 years of age ( $SD = 13.05$ ) and worked for their current organization for 11.65 years

<sup>1</sup>[www.panelclix.nl](http://www.panelclix.nl)

( $SD = 10.94$ ). Participants worked in a broad range of industries, such as finance, transport, education, healthcare, culture, IT, and HR. The majority (67.5%) did not have a managerial position.

### Measures

All used a 5-point scale to measure all items, which ranged from *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (5).

**Strengths-Based Leadership.** We measured strengths-based leadership with eight items adapted from a scale for measuring perceived organizational support for strengths use (van Woerkom, Mostert, et al., 2016). This scale was adapted by making items refer to the leader instead of the organization. Example items were: "My leader gives me the opportunity to do what I am good at" and "My leader helps me to do my job in a manner that best suits my strengths" The scale showed a very good reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .951.

**Employee Resilience.** We measured employees' psychological resilience with the 9 items of the Resilience Evaluation Scale (RES; van der Meer et al., 2018). The scale measures two resilience dimensions: Self-efficacy (e.g., "I can easily adapt in a difficult situation") and self-confidence (e.g., "I have confidence in myself"). The scale showed good reliability ( $\alpha = .889$ ).

**Employee Work Engagement.** We used the 3 items of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-3; Schaufeli et al., 2019) to measure work engagement. These items measure vigor ("At my work, I feel bursting with energy"), dedication ("I am enthusiastic about my job") and absorption ("I am immersed in my work"). The scale showed good internal consistency with  $\alpha = .874$ .

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 provides an overview of the means, standard deviations, and correlations between the study variables. Because age and gender were significantly related to our mediator variable resilience and our outcome variable work engagement, we included both as control variables when testing our hypothesized model.

### Measurement Model

We used Mplus Version 8.5 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998/2020) to conduct all of our analyses. We first tested our measurement model in a confirmatory factor analyses. The measurement model consisted of three factors: Strengths-based leadership with 8 indicators, resilience with 2 indicators (i.e., self-efficacy and self-confidence) and work engagement with three indicators (i.e., vigor, dedication, and absorption). Our measurement model fitted the data well,  $\chi^2 = 325.929$  (62), CFI = .976, TLI = .969, RMSEA = .062, SRMR = .022; and all items loaded significantly ( $p < .001$ ) on their intended factor.

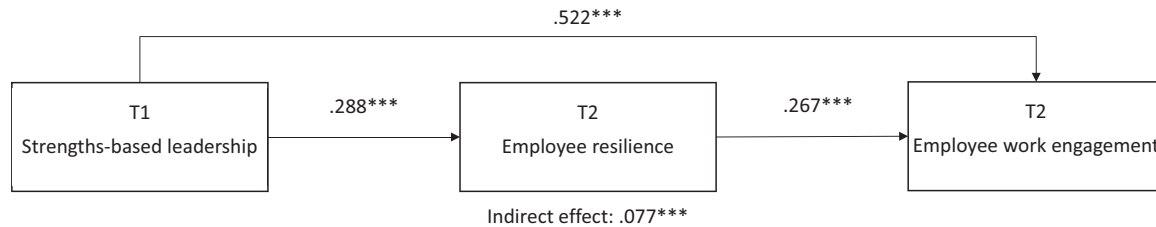
### Structural Model

Next, we tested our two hypotheses simultaneously in our structural equation model. We provide an overview of these results in Figure 1. To control for measurement error, we fixed the residual variance of our study variables at  $(1 - \text{reliability}) \times \text{variance}$  (Antonakis et al., 2010; Ree & Carretta, 2006). First, in support of Hypothesis 1, we found that T1 strengths-based leadership positively related to employees' work engagement at T2,  $b^* = .522$ ,  $SE = .025$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% BC-CI [.481, .563]. Next, we found that T1

**Table 1.** Correlations among Study Variables

Variable Name	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Gender	–	–					
2. Age	43.87	13.05	–.161***				
3. T1 SBL	4.70	1.26	.000	–.012			
4. T2 Resilience	3.80	.56	–.073*	.184***	.264***		
5. T2 Work Engagement	4.42	1.26	–.055	.050	.548***	.383***	–

Note. SBL = Strengths-Based Leadership; *SD* = Standard Deviation. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Figure 1.** Standardized Results for the Hypothesized Mediation Model

strengths-based leadership positively related to employee resilience at T2,  $b^* = .288$ ,  $SE = .030$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% BC-CI [.239, .337]. In turn, employee resilience at T2 positively related to employee work engagement at T2,  $b^* = .267$ ,  $SE = .029$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% BC-CI [.219, .315]. Finally, supporting Hypothesis 2, T1 strengths-based leadership indirectly related to employee work engagement at T2 through employee resilience at T2,  $b^* = .077$ ,  $SE = .011$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% BC-CI [.058, .096]. The model without control variables explained 8.1% and 42.4% of the variance in employee resilience and engagement respectively; while this was 12.6% and 42.5% for the model including age and gender as control variables.

### Exploratory Analyses

Although we did not have specific expectations regarding differences between the two resilience components self-confidence and self-efficacy, we explored a mediation model in which T1 strengths-based leadership influenced employee work engagement at T2 through employee self-confidence and self-efficacy at T2. We first tested another measurement model, this time with 4 factors: Strengths-based leadership with 8 indicators, self-efficacy with 4 indicators, self-confidence with five indicators and work engagement with three indicators (i.e., vigor, dedication, and absorption). This model fitted slightly worse to the data compared to the measurement model combining self-confidence and self-efficacy into one factor, but still fitted the data well,  $\chi^2 = 934.438$  (62), CFI = .948, TLI = .940, RMSEA = .065, SRMR = .035, and all items loaded significantly ( $p < .001$ ) on their intended factor.

Next, we tested our structural model including the predictor, two mediators, and the outcome variable. Results showed that T1 strength-based leadership significantly and positively related to both self-confidence,  $b^* = .272$ ,  $SE = .034$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% BC-CI [.216, .328]; and self-efficacy,  $b^* = .289$ ,  $SE = .031$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% BC-CI [.238, .340]; as well as employees' work engagement,  $b^* = .517$ ,  $SE = .025$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% BC-CI [.475, .558] at T2. In turn, self-confidence at T2 was not related to employee work engagement at T2,  $b^* = -.016$ ,  $SE = .083$ ,  $p = .850$ , 95% BC-CI [–.153, .121]; whereas

self-efficacy at T2 positively related to employees' work engagement at T2,  $b^* = .301$ ,  $SE = .079$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% BC-CI [.171, .432]. Following these results, the indirect effect from strengths-based leadership to employee work engagement was insignificant for self-confidence,  $b^* = -.004$ ,  $SE = .023$ ,  $p = .850$ , 95% BC-CI [–.042, .033]; but significant for self-efficacy,  $b^* = .087$ ,  $SE = .025$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% BC-CI [.047, .127]. The entire model including the control variables gender and age explained 43.6% of the variance in work engagement, 12% in self-efficacy and 11.9% in self-confidence versus 43.4%, 8.1% and 7.2% of the variance in the model without the control variables.

### Discussion

Due to several factors, occupational stress is hard to avoid in contemporary careers, resulting in reduced levels of career satisfaction (Nisar & Rasheed, 2020), career commitment (van der Heijden et al., 2009), as well as impaired individual health and organizational performance (Kašpárková et al., 2018). Over time, these negative effects may even worsen since perceiving a stressful event as threatening and feeling incapable of coping with it is likely to increase stress and ultimately diminish resilience (Baker et al., 2021). To reduce this negative impact, many organizations have adopted resilience-building trainings. However, a meta-analysis has found that the effect of these interventions is rather small and diminishes over time (Vanhove et al., 2016). Therefore, leaders may play a crucial and more sustainable role in helping their employees to develop resilience and stay engaged in their work. Specifically, our study showed that by receiving help from their leader to identify, use, and develop their strengths, employees felt more resilient and more engaged in their work.

Because contemporary careers are characterized by insecurity and continuous change, it is important to leverage workers' strengths that may function as protective factors against stress (Di Fabio, 2014). Strengths-based leaders can help workers to recognize the role their strengths have played in moments of optimal functioning and thereby help to overcome future challenges (Owens et al., 2018) by relying on personal abilities (Kotzé & Lamb, 2012).

We contribute to the literature on resilience because we show that strengths-based leadership can provide a sustainable way to build employee resilience. Many contemporary workplaces are characterized by high work stressors (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2022) and organizations have the important task to reduce these work stressors and create healthy work environments in which employees can thrive rather than survive. Yet, as it is unlikely that organizations are always able to optimally control work stressors such as high workloads and working under time pressure, it is just as important for organizations to build a resilient and engaged workforce that can cope with adversities at work. Whereas organizations often invest in ineffective resilience training for their employees (Vanhove et al., 2016), our study showed that strengths-based leadership could be a more sustainable way to build employee resilience, because leaders are an integral part of the organization and frequently interact with their followers. As such, leaders can continuously monitor their followers' behavior to observe their unique strengths and adopt a more individualized approach to building their resilience.

Conventional approaches aimed at cultivating workplace resilience often revolve around training combinations of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive skills. However, since the usefulness of specific stress responses hinges on individual differences regarding capabilities, experiences, and context, it is essential to address these differences (Baker et al., 2021). Whereas previous studies have investigated how various leadership styles such as charismatic leadership (Harland et al., 2005), transformational leadership (Nguyen et al., 2016), and servant leadership (Kool & van Dierendonck, 2012) influence follower resilience, these studies disregard the variability in individuals' resilience levels that require leaders to address subordinates' needs uniquely (Kakkar, 2019).

Research on resilience interventions confirms that more individualized approaches to resilience building are most effective, but least often used (Joyce et al., 2018), which could be because these are costly ventures. By helping employees identify their unique strengths and encouraging and supporting them to use and further develop these strengths, leaders provide important resources such as support, coaching, and recognition, that help employees to build their self-efficacy and self-confidence (i.e., resilience).

Our additional analyses pinpointed that the influence of strengths-based leadership on engagement was mainly transmitted via self-efficacy (i.e., believing you are able to adaptively cope with stressful situations) instead of self-confidence (i.e., trusting yourself). This means that strengths-based leadership is a source of work engagement mainly because it improves employees' perception of being able to display adequate behavior in response to adversities (e.g., adjust in difficult situations, cope with unexpected problems, handle a lot of issues at the same time) rather than bringing about a more general positive belief in oneself.

Our research also contributes to the scant strengths-based leadership literature. Thus far, this literature has mainly focused on the influence of strengths-based leadership on employee strengths use (e.g., Ding & Yu, 2021; Ding et al., 2020; Matsuo, 2022) and performance (e.g., Ding & Yu, 2020a; 2020b; Ding et al., 2020). We add to this growing literature by studying strengths-based leadership through a resource-building lens and showing that strengths-based leadership builds employees' work engagement, both directly and indirectly through increased employee self-efficacy. We specifically contribute to this literature by showing that strengths-based leadership not only benefits the organization in terms of increased productivity and innovation, but also benefits the employee because of increased levels of well-being.

Many leaders tend to find out what is wrong with their employees and then attempt to fix it (Luthans, 2002). Therefore, before we can expect leaders to help their employees with developing resilience, we need to invest in the development of leaders themselves. Obviously, this leadership development should ideally also be based on a strengths-based approach. This ensures that the learning process generates instead of consumes energy and makes leaders aware that a strengths-based approach does not mean that weaknesses need to be ignored (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015). Strengths-based leadership training programs could for example start with a focus on the leaders, helping them to identify their own unique strengths, encouraging them to use their strengths more often, and discussing opportunities how to better use and further develop their strengths. In general, it is important to familiarize leaders with the concept of strengths: What are strengths, how do you recognize them, and what is the use of playing to your strengths? Although specific tools exist to assess employees' unique strengths, such as the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), feedforward interviews (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011), and reflected best self-exercises (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Roberts et al., 2005), there are also more informal ways to observe strengths in employees, for example, by pinpointing situations in which an employee seems energized, engaged, and shows rapid learning curves and a pattern of successful performance (Linley et al., 2007).

Teaching leaders how to discover their own and their employees' strengths and how to distribute tasks within a team in such a way that each team member can make the best use of their strengths will help leaders to develop a strengths-based focus that contributes to a resilient and engaged workforce. Another way to cultivate a strengths-based approach in organizations is by incorporating a strengths focus in performance and assessment interviews (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011; van Woerkom & De Bruijn, 2016). Focusing the performance review on successful aspects of employee performance, enables employees to understand their distinctive strengths and how to expand these strengths and talents in the future (Kluger & Nir, 2010; Roberts et al., 2005), and helps in avoiding the Pavlovian reflex to translate weaknesses into development goals (van Woerkom & Kroon, 2020). Whereas in some cases it may indeed be necessary to remediate deficits, in other cases it may be better to manage around those deficits, for instance by encouraging complementary partnering with coworkers with complementary strengths.

Strengths of this study are the generalizable sample of the Dutch workforce and the two-wave time-lagged design. The study is also timely, with the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changing the way we used to work, also leading to increased demands and work pressure (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2022; Kniffin et al., 2021). This makes employee resilience extra salient.

Although we advocate for a strengths focus, we do not dismiss the benefits of identifying and working on weaknesses. In that spirit, we identified several limitations of our own study that provide valuable feedback to future studies on the topic. One of these limitations is that resilience and work engagement were both measured at the same time-point (i.e., T2). Although the relation between self-efficacy –i.e., one of the components of resilience– and work engagement is theoretically well-argued for and supported by previous research (Halbesleben, 2010), it is possible that employees who feel more energized also feel more self-efficacious. Therefore, we would encourage replication of our study using a three-wave longitudinal model (e.g., MacKinnon, 2008; Reichardt, 2011). Additionally, we show support for the idea that having more resources

(i.e., a strengths-based leader) builds more resources (i.e., resilience). As a next step, it would be interesting to study whether this instigates a gain cycle in which higher resilience evokes more support and encouragement from strengths-based leaders.

Another important question for future research is related to the time lag chosen in time-lagged or longitudinal designs. As Griep and colleagues (2021) as well as Dormann (2022) rightfully note, theory drives our hypotheses, but not our time lags. This is largely because most theories in our field do not specify the role of time –i.e., how much time it takes for a certain effect to show. As a result, time lags –such as the one used in the current study– are often based on general rules of thumb, such as the time lags that are common to a specific field. While we are in the process of developing time sensitive theories, Griep et al. (2021) recommend using short time lags to capture the “maximum effect moment” (p. 4) and to look for the shortest possible time lag that is needed to capture an effect. Therefore, it could be interesting to study strengths-based leadership using weekly or even daily diary designs in the future.

To further explore the link between strengths-based leadership and employee resilience, it would be interesting to examine whether the support of leaders to identify, use, and further develop employees’ strengths, also leads to employees being more aware of their strengths, and using and developing their strengths more often. Many individuals are not consciously aware of their strengths and even when they are, do not use them often (Buckingham, 2010; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). It seems likely that strength-based leaders contribute to employee resilience by creating this strengths awareness and creating opportunities to use and develop their strengths, which may even create a crossover effect from being more resilient at work to being able to cope with adversities more generally. Also, strengths-based leaders focus not just on the individual strengths of employees, but also on the constellation of strengths within a team. As such, strengths-based leaders may not only create more resilient and engaged employees, but also more resilient and engaged teams.

While we tested a rather parsimonious mediation model that sheds the first light on the role of strengths-based leaders in enhancing employees’ resilience and work engagement, it seems likely that there may be circumstances under which strengths-based leadership can be especially effective. Building on Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) stress-coping model, it would be interesting to investigate to what extent strengths-based leaders are successful in building employee resilience in highly stressful situations.

Another avenue for the future is to not focus exclusively on how leaders can play to the strengths of their employees, but also on how leaders work on their own strengths. For example, based on social learning (Bandura, 1977) and social information processing (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) theories, it is likely that a strength-based approach that is widely adopted within an organization, trickles down and facilitates everyone within an organization to focus on their own and others’ strengths.

Using a two-wave time lagged design, we tested whether employees feel more resilient and engaged in their work when working with a strengths-based leader. In a representative sample of 1095 Dutch employees, we showed that by helping employees to identify, use, and further develop their unique strengths, leaders indeed contribute to their employees’ work engagement, both directly and indirectly through increased resilience (i.e., self-efficacy regarding adaptive coping with stressful situations). Because of increased costs resulting from work stress, it is becoming increasingly important for organizations to invest in employee resilience. Our study shows that investing in strengths-based leaders is a sustainable way to create a resilient and engaged workforce.

**Authorship credit.** Both authors: Conceptualization, data curation, writing-review and editing. K. B.: Formal analysis, writing-original draft. M. van W.: Investigation, project administration.

**Data sharing.** All materials are available upon request.

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