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PREFERRED AND AVOIDED LEADERSHIP STYLES OF HRBPS: EVIDENCE FROM THE WERK INVENTORY

Marzena STASZKIEWICZ[1*], Katarzyna KLIMKIEWICZ[2]

[1] AGH University of Krakow; staszkiewicz@agh.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0003-3249-9945
[2] AGH University of Krakow; kklimkie@agh.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0003-2927-8308
*Correspondence author

Purpose: The aim of the article is to identify the leadership styles applied by HRBPs and then determine whether individuals performing this function display flexible use of different styles, or whether they exhibit clear preferences, dominance, or avoidance of specific forms of leadership (WERK). The results are discussed in the context of contemporary requirements ascribed to the HRBP role in the relevant literature.
Methodology: The study was conducted among 90 HRBPs using the Leadership Styles Inventory WERK, which diagnoses leadership preferences in four areas: Cheerleader, Steward, Revolutionary, and Captain. Statistical analyses were applied, including measures of central tendency, standard deviations, and significance tests of differences.
Findings: The results indicate the dominance of the Captain and Cheerleader styles among the HRBPs surveyed, with clearly lower scores for the Steward and Revolutionary styles. This means that, in their leadership behaviours, HRBPs most frequently display a task-oriented approach (implementation, decisiveness) or a relationship-oriented approach (empathy, communication). A significant gender difference was found on the Cheerleader scale, where women obtained higher scores.
Research limitations/implications: Study limitations include the sample size, absence of key contextual variables, and reliance solely on self-report measures. Future research should incorporate subordinates' perspectives and a longitudinal design to provide a more comprehensive analysis of HRBP leadership styles.
Practical implications: The findings help organisations deliberately design the HRBP role and plan development by highlighting both strengths in task–relationship styles and competency gaps.
Social implications: The results clarify how HR specialists interpret their leadership role, encouraging reflection on its impact on employee experience, organisational climate and culture.
Originality: The article is one of the first studies to combine empirical data obtained using the WERK Leadership Style Inventory with the current conceptualisation of the HRBP role in Polish literature, presenting the leadership profile of HRBPs.
Keywords: HR Business Partner, leadership styles, WERK Leadership Style Inventory.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The HR Business Partner (HRBP) role is becoming increasingly important in organizations. HRBPs are expected not only to know HR processes, but also to shape organizational culture, support managers, and drive development and transformation. As a result, leadership competences are key to HRBP effectiveness in both daily operations and building long-term business relationships. The literature shows that HRBPs combine strategic roles—business (strategic) partner and change agent—with operational ones—administrative expert and employee advocate (Buckley, Monk, 2004; Ulrich, Brockbank, 2008)—integrating the perspectives of employees, managers, and the organization. HRBP tasks span relational, operational, and strategic areas. Because of this complexity, competences in leadership, influence, relationship building, and change support are crucial to HRBP effectiveness. They enable collaboration with stakeholders, execution of daily tasks, and participation in designing and implementing long-term organizational solutions, thus significantly shaping both functional and strategic HR (Lo, Macky, Pio, 2015). This broad responsibility makes it impossible to define a single leadership style suitable for all HRBP situations. Therefore, analysing preferred and avoided leadership styles among HRBPs is essential to understand how they shape their leadership behaviours, build employee relationships, and manage change, tasks, and organizational structures.

One of the tools enabling an objective diagnosis of a preferred leadership style is the Leadership Styles Inventory WERK, developed by Brzezińska and Rafalak (2015). WERK identifies four distinct styles— Cheerleader, Steward, Revolutionary, and Captain— which represent characteristic ways in which a leader functions in relation to people and tasks. WERK is a tool with solid theoretical and psychometric foundations, and its growing presence in scientific research confirms its usefulness for analysing leadership behaviours in various professional groups (Brzezińska, Rafalak 2015; Rozbejko, 2019; Czarska-Bonanaty, 2020; Kraczla, 2020; Kowal, Zaremba, Ziobrowska, 2023). Despite extensive literature on HR leadership, few studies examine the leadership styles of HR Business Partners (HRBPs) directly. Analysing WERK profiles in this group can therefore substantially advance knowledge of contemporary HR specialists' leadership behaviours. The aim of this article is to determine whether individuals performing HRBP role are characterised rather by flexible use of different styles, or whether they exhibit clearly preferred, dominant, or avoided forms of leadership. The research findings presenting these patterns are discussed in the context of the challenges and expectations associated with the HRBP function.

2. Leadership in HR Business Partner role

The HRBP role is a key element in transforming HR into a strategic partner, a shift discussed in the literature since the 1990s, especially in Dave Ulrich's (1997) concept. Over the past three decades, people management has evolved from traditional personnel administration, through functional HR, to strategic partnership focused on creating value for the business and its stakeholders (Ulrich, Dulebohn, 2015). The latest HR Competency Study (HRCS), a key indicator of HR's evolution, identifies five main HRBP competencies: supporting organizational market goals, developing human capabilities, using data to prioritize human capital investments, building positive relationships within HR and across the organization, and simplifying complex processes in a dynamic environment (Ulrich et al., 2021). This highlights how HRBPs, as strategic advisors, work with management to align HR activities with organizational goals. As Ulrich et al. (2012) note, the strategic partner role involves not only participating in decision-making, but also influencing organizational development by introducing innovations and shaping HR policies consistent with business objectives. Cooperation between HRBPs and managers should be a direct, strategic, multidimensional relationship aimed at aligning HR activities with organizational business goals. Through joint strategic efforts, they can build an efficient work environment that supports the company's overarching objectives (Siska et al., 2024). In this context, beyond business orientation and skills in technology, digitalization and data analysis, particular emphasis is placed on HRBPs' abilities in relationship management, advising, influencing, and shaping business decisions (Wash, 2023). A key element of the HRBP role is its leadership-oriented, though non-hierarchical, nature. As Reilly (2012) notes, although HRBPs usually lack formal authority over line managers, they provide advice, coaching and moderation. In doing so, they influence not only individual leaders but also how leadership is understood and practiced across the organization (Klimkiewicz, Staszkiewicz, 2021).

Research among HRBPs shows that influence and leadership competencies are crucial not only for the strategic partner role, but also for the change agent, employee advocate, and administrative expert roles (Kopertyńska, Dernowska, 2021, pp. 31-36). The change agent and employee advocate roles rely mainly on leadership-related competencies such as communication, emotional intelligence, influence, relationship building, and conflict resolution. In the administrative expert role, selected leadership competencies are also important, as they enable influence over stakeholders and shape the quality of HR processes, although each role requires different forms of influence and leadership behavior. Examining HRBPs' leadership styles is therefore essential for understanding how they exercise leadership. Such analysis identifies recurring leadership patterns, assesses their alignment with role requirements and organizational needs, and reveals dominant styles within the HRBP group—relational, procedural, task-oriented, or idea-focused—as well as their variation by demographic and organizational factors such as gender, age, tenure, and organizational size.

3. WERK Leadership Style Inventory

WERK is a psychometric tool designed to identify management styles. The inventory thus makes it possible to draw conclusions about the way individuals function within an organization by determining the degree of consistency between this functioning and the four management styles proposed by the authors: Cheerleader, Steward, Revolutionary, and Captain. A management style is understood here as a mental map reflecting one's perception of one's own functioning in a managerial role: "Me as a manager." It depicts the mode of adaptation characteristic of a given individual to challenges and tasks of a motivational, developmental, and cognitive nature, which are important in the context of performing a managerial role.

In explaining individual differences in the leadership styles adopted, the authors of the tool (Brzezińska, Rafalak, 2015) employ an interactionist approach—integrating both leadership predispositions (personality dispositions) and leadership experience (properties of the situation and environment). They emphasize the contribution of these two groups of variables to the formation of an individual's characteristic management style. In the development of WERK, particular importance was attached to personality factors derived from Jungian psychology, situational factors drawn from Belbin's concept, and the organizational context.

The following theories and studies were considered crucial for the conceptualization of the WERK model: Carl Jung's theory of psychic energy and mental functions (see Dudek, 2021), Douglas McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y (see McGregor, 1960; Head, 2011), Kurt Lewin's research on the nature of leadership (see Lewin, Lippitt, White, 1939), the managerial behavior continuum developed by Robert Tannenbaum and Warren Schmidt (see Tannenbaum, Schmidt, 1958), the leadership theory based on research conducted in Ohio (see Stogdill, Coons, 1957) and Michigan (see Likert, 1961), as well as Mark Snyder's concept of self-monitoring (1974). The result of the work undertaken by the authors of the tool is the WERK model, which identifies four distinct styles of managerial functioning.

The Cheerleader is a leader who prioritises people, focusing on teamwork, integration, and a positive work atmosphere. They show high social sensitivity and can defuse tensions, but their decision-making and organisational skills are usually weaker. They may avoid assertiveness, struggle with discipline, and rely heavily on others' opinions.

The Steward focuses on procedures, norms, and precise task execution. They value order, predictability, and strict hierarchy. In relationships, they remain formal and can be critical and demanding toward subordinates, which may limit flexibility and openness.

The Revolutionary is a leader focused on innovation, change, and creating new solutions. They show strong conceptual thinking, self-confidence, and drive to pursue ambitious challenges. They prefer visionary work over implementation and are expressive in promoting their ideas, which can make their evaluations of employees subjective.

The Captain is task-focused and pragmatic: decisive, goal-driven, consistent, emotionally stable, and practical. They organise the team's work, monitor results, and fairly assess subordinates, while keeping distance and showing limited openness to innovation.

The tool identifies a respondent's preferred leadership style and what they reject as incompatible with their self-image as a manager. The profile shows both the dominant and least typical styles. It does not assess managerial effectiveness but describes the preferred way of operating.

Although WERK was designed with practical application in human resource management in mind, it is also used in scientific research concerning both the evaluation of the tool itself and the use of WERK results to study organizational phenomena (e.g., managerial effectiveness, innovativeness, personality traits). Studies indicate that Polish managers often combine elements of various leadership styles rather than displaying one dominant style. In both the public (Czarska-Bonanaty, 2020) and commercial sectors (Rozbejko, 2019), many respondents showed no clear prevailing style, and differences between styles were small. This likely reflects managerial adaptability, expressed in flexible, situationally adjusted leadership. Such a pattern may be viewed positively by managers themselves, enhancing their perceived self-efficacy (Rozbejko, 2019).

Brzezińska and Rafalak (2015), authors of WERK, stress that results do not determine a manager's success; however, some styles better match specific organizational environments. Kowal et al. (2023) found that team innovativeness was higher under leaders with Revolutionary and Cheerleader profiles, while the Steward style did not foster innovation. Nonetheless, style effectiveness depends on its fit with organizational needs: in settings requiring strict regulatory compliance, the Steward style may be indispensable.

Research using WERK has examined links between psychological variables and preferred leadership style. Kraczle (2020) found that an individual's sense of life meaning and axiological values do not determine leadership style. However, validation studies by the tool's authors (Brzezińska, Rafalak, 2015) show several associations between the intensity and dominance of specific styles and personality dimensions measured by the NEO-FFI (Zawadzki, Strelau, Szczepaniak, Śliwińska, 1998) and the ACL (Gough, Heilbrun, 2012).

4. Methods

The aim of the article is to identify the leadership styles employed by HRBPs. To achieve this aim, the following specific research questions were posed: whether clearly preferred leadership styles can be identified among HRBPs, whether there are styles that are dominant or avoided, and whether HRBPs demonstrate flexibility in applying different leadership styles depending on the situation.

The study used WERK, whereas the reliability of the tool was assessed as satisfactory. Cronbach's α coefficients for the individual scales ranged from 0.70 to 0.84 (Brzezińska, Rafalak, 2015). WERK is characterised by high theoretical validity, resulting from its construction being grounded in extensive literature and a synthesis of key leadership concepts. Criterion validity was preliminarily assessed using HR experts' opinions and correlations with 360° evaluations and other managerial competence questionnaires. The tool includes 60 adjectives in 15 sets of 4. In each set, respondents ranked the adjectives from most to least self-descriptive, limiting self-presentation bias and prompting evaluation of potentially uncomfortable traits. The survey took about 20 minutes.

The study involved 90 HRBPs, including 79 women (87.78%) and 11 men (12.22%), which reflects the typical predominance of women in HR departments. Detailed data on the characteristics of the research sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Characteristics of the research group

Variable	Category	%
Gender	Men	12.22
	Women	87.78
Age [years]	18–25	2.22
	26–30	23.33
	31–35	32.22
	36–40	27.78
	41–45	11.11
	46–50	2.22
	50+	1.11
Tenure [years]	<1	1.11
	1–3	6.67
	3–5	22.22
	5–7	20.00
	7–10	17.78
	10–15	18.89
	15–20	6.67
	20+	6.67
Company size [number of employees]	Micro (1–9)	3.33
	Small (10–50)	5.56
	Middle (51–249)	11.11
	Big (250–1000)	25.56
	>1000	54.44

Source: Own elaboration.

5. Results

Four leadership styles according to the WERK Inventory were analyzed. The mean scores for the entire sample are presented in Table 2.

Tabele 2.
WERK style among HRBPs

WERK Style	Mean	Standard deviation
Cheerleader	43,42	8,856
Steward	31,94	7,183
Revolutionary	30,55	8,018
Captain	44,09	5,659

Source: Own elaboration.

The highest values were obtained for the Captain and Cheerleader styles, which suggests their dominance in the studied group. The Steward and Revolutionist styles achieved lower means, indicating a lesser importance in respondents' preferences. The analysis of distribution normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests) indicates that most variables can be treated as normally distributed, although in selected cases (e.g., Steward among women, Captain among men) deviations from strict normality were observed.

Pearson's correlation analysis (Table 3) showed that among the demographic variables only gender was significantly associated with WERK scores: women obtained higher scores in the Cheerleader style ($r = 0.238$; $p = 0.025$). Age, job tenure, and company size did not exhibit significant relationships with any of the WERK styles. At the same time, the observed strong negative correlations between styles indicate their opposing nature, consistent with the construction of the instrument.

Tabele 3.
Pearson's correlation analysis for WERK

Variable	Gender	Age	Tenure	Company size	Cheerleader	Steward	Revolutionary	Capitan
Gender	1	0,079	-0,021	0,069	**,238***	-0,066	-0,056	-0,205
Age	0,079	1	**,796****	-0,002	0,055	0,077	-0,050	-0,109
Tenure	-0,021	**,796****	1	0,076	0,053	0,161	-0,141	-0,084
Company size	0,069	-0,002	0,076	1	-0,002	0,102	-0,086	-0,001
Cheerleader	**,238***	0,055	0,053	-0,002	1	**-,236***	**-,430****	**-,657****
Steward	-0,066	0,077	0,161	0,102	**-,236***	1	**-,619****	-0,024
Revolutionary	-0,056	-0,050	-0,141	-0,086	**-,430****	**-,619****	1	0,041
Capitan	-0,205	-0,109	-0,084	-0,001	**-,657****	-0,024	0,041	1

Note. **p<0,01 (two-tailed), *p<0,05 (two-tailed).

Source: Own elaboration.

The independent-samples t-test revealed a significant difference between genders only for the Cheerleader style ($t = –2.282$; $p = 0.025$), with women achieving higher scores than men (mean difference = –6.438). No statistically significant differences were found for the Steward, Revolutionary, or Captain styles.

In the analysis of the dominant style, the most frequently indicated style was Captain (26.8%). The next most frequent were the Cheerleader (18.6%), Revolutionary (15.5%), and Steward (13.4%) styles. In 25.8% of cases, the results did not allow for the identification of a dominant leadership style. In the studied group, the Captain style occurred most often, whereas the remaining styles were distributed relatively evenly, without a clear predominance.

In the analysis of the avoided style, the most frequently indicated style was Steward (27.8%). The next in terms of frequency were the Revolutionary (25.8%) and Cheerleader (16.5%) styles. The least avoided style was Captain (6.2%). A total of 23.7% of cases fell into the group in which no avoided leadership style emerged. The results indicate that, in the studied group, respondents most often avoid the Steward style, whereas the Captain style is avoided least frequently.

The results show that HRBPs do not use leadership styles flexibly. Two styles clearly dominated: Captain and Cheerleader, while Revolutionary and Steward scored much lower and were rarely chosen as dominant or preferred. This distribution indicates a strong preference for specific ways of acting rather than balanced use of different styles. The Steward style was most often avoided, further confirming limited flexibility across the entire WERK spectrum.

6. Discussion

The study results revealed the dominance of two leadership styles – Captain and Cheerleader – with relatively lower scores for the Steward and Revolutionary styles. This configuration is consistent with the characteristics of the HRBP role described in the literature, which combines task-oriented, relational and strategic elements, and requires simultaneous activity at the interface of the interests of employees, managers and the organization (Buckley, Monk, 2004; Ulrich, Brockbank, 2008). The HRBP model assumes the multidimensionality of business partners' activities, including a strong emphasis on cooperation, influence, communication, and the implementation of solutions aligned with organizational objectives (Lo, Macky, Pio, 2015; Kopertyńska, Dernowska, 2021; Wash, 2023).

The Captain style, defined in the WERK model as a pragmatic, task-oriented and consistent approach, finds its most direct reflection in the roles of strategic partner and change agent, which constitute key dimensions of HRBP work (Ulrich, 1997). Owing to the ability to organize work, monitor outcomes, and maintain emotional stability, the Captain facilitates the achievement of business goals and the enforcement of decisions, which corresponds to HRBP's responsibility for supporting managers and coordinating strategy-related activities (Ulrich, Dulebohn, 2015). Respondents most often identified with this mode of operation: the Captain was the most frequently indicated dominant style and the least frequently avoided. This suggests that, in practice, HRBPs primarily ensure effective goal attainment and operational coherence of HR processes, consistent with business expectations of this role described in the literature.

The high level of the Cheerleader style corresponds to the second key pillar of HRBP work—interpersonal competencies. As cited studies show, core HRBP competencies, especially in the roles of change agent and employee advocate, include communication, relationship-building, emotional intelligence, and conflict-resolution skills (Kopertyńska,

Dernowska, 2021). Focused on relationships, work climate, and integration, the Cheerleader style naturally supports these functions. The finding that women scored significantly higher on the Cheerleader style is consistent with research on HRBP psychosocial competencies, which shows that women in HR more often display relational skills (Staszkiewicz, 2021). In the HRBP role, this is crucial, as HRBP leadership is largely non-hierarchical and rests on influence, expert authority, and trust rather than formal power (Reilly, 2012). The Cheerleader style can therefore be an important resource for fostering dialogue, mediating conflicts, and building engagement among managers and employees.

The two most common styles—the Captain and the Cheerleader —reflect the main areas of HRBP work: task and relationship orientation. The HRBP role requires combining operational, strategic, and interpersonal activities, and its effectiveness depends on balancing organizational demands with employee needs (Lo et al., 2015).

The study also shows a weaker presence of the Revolutionary style, which may seem surprising given that HRBPs are described as catalysts of organizational change. However, although this role has a strategic component, it is firmly embedded in operational and implementation realities: HRBPs support managers, help enforce decisions, and ensure consistent HR policies (Ulrich et al., 2012). This positioning may favor pragmatic, execution-focused styles (Captain) and relational styles (Cheerleader) over visionary ones. Thus, the low share of the Revolutionary style may reflect organizational responsibility structures rather than a lack of innovative potential among HRBPs. Similar findings have appeared in WERK-based research in other professional groups, where the Revolutionary style was rarely dominant among managers, especially in highly formalized, process-driven work environments (Czarska-Bonanaty, 2020; Rozbejko, 2019).

The low prevalence of the Steward style aligns with the evolving HRBP role, in which traditional administrative tasks have moved to shared service centers and operational units, while HRBPs now focus mainly on advisory, relational, and strategic work. In this study, Steward was the most frequently avoided style, suggesting a deliberate move away from the stereotypical, bureaucratic "personnel department" role. However, this low Steward score, though understandable, may pose challenges in organizations where regulatory compliance and process accuracy are crucial (Brzezińska, Rafalak, 2015).

Concurrently, in light of the ongoing discussion on the upcoming challenges in HRBP work, related, among others, to the role of AI, the role of compliance and digital ethics, as well as the ability to design organizational structures that can respond sufficiently quickly to market changes (Li, Kim, 2024; Ulrich, 2025), both the Revolutionary style and the Steward style may gain in importance for the effective enactment of the HRBP role.

7. Summary

The study shows that HRBPs most often favor the Captain and Cheerleader leadership styles, combining a pragmatic focus on goals with relationship-building and team integration. This aligns with the current view of the HRBP role, which demands both implementation-oriented action and strong interpersonal skills (Ulrich, Brockbank, 2008). Lower scores for the Steward and Revolutionary styles suggest that HRBPs less often take on highly procedural or highly innovative functions, reflecting the mainly advisory–implementation nature of the role.

Future research should include managers' and employees' perspectives to reduce self-report bias. Longitudinal studies could assess the stability of leadership styles over time and compare HRBP profiles across organizations and industries. It would also be valuable to analyze how WERK styles relate to the effectiveness of HR implementations.

Organizations can use WERK study results to design the HRBP role more deliberately and to inform HRBP recruitment and development, aligning competencies with the organization and its operating model. The dominance of Captain and Cheerleader styles highlights the need to build both task-related and relational competencies. The low prevalence of Revolutionary and Steward styles indicates gaps in innovativeness and process discipline, which can be addressed by assigning complementary roles within HR teams or offering targeted development programs.

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