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THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP ON BUILDING TRUST IN A CRISIS SITUATION

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Purpose: The aim of the article is to identify the mechanisms through which leadership influences the building of employee trust in crisis situations, and to determine the significance of this process for the development of human capital in enterprises and the economy.
Design/methodology/approach: The article employs a critical analysis of Polish and international literature in the fields of crisis management, organizational psychology, and human capital theory. A diagnostic survey method was used, applying the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) technique. The research sample was purposive and consisted of 300 leaders from medium and large enterprises operating under conditions of increased market uncertainty in Poland.
Findings: The analysis indicates that a leadership style based on transparent communication, accountability, and emotional support significantly strengthens employee trust. Trust reduces the level of uncertainty, increases engagement, and helps maintain team productivity. In crisis situations, the leader becomes a key stabilizing element of the organization's human capital, limiting employee turnover and a decline in motivation.
Research limitations/implications: The study is cross-sectional in nature and is based on respondents' self-reported data.
Practical implications: The research findings indicate that developing leadership competencies in crisis communication and employee emotion management can enhance an organization's resilience to market disruptions. The deliberate cultivation of a culture of trust supports employment stability and improves the economic efficiency of enterprises.
Social implications: Strong leadership that fosters trust helps limit the negative social effects of economic crises, such as occupational stress and job insecurity. This contributes to labor market stability, the economic security of households, and the strengthening of social capital.
Originality/value: The article integrates contributions from management science, economics, and organizational psychology, highlighting the interdisciplinary role of leadership in protecting human capital under crisis conditions.
Keywords: leadership, trust, capital, crisis, management.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Human capital constitutes a key resource of modern organizations and a foundation of economic development. In times of crisis, its importance increases, as employees' ability to adapt and learn determines the continuity of business operations. Crisis generates uncertainty, lowers team morale, and weakens organizational ties. Under conditions of growing informational uncertainty, an organization's ability to counteract disinformation and strengthen the credibility of internal communication becomes particularly important. Disruptions in the flow of reliable information weaken social and organizational trust, negatively affecting the stability of institutional structures and relationships among organizational members (Załoga, 2022, pp. 43-62).

In such conditions, leadership becomes especially important. Leaders stabilize employees' emotions, set directions for action, and build a sense of security. The contemporary organizational environment requires leaders to possess well-developed communication competencies, particularly in the digital sphere. The ability to manage information, select it appropriately, and counter information threats supports the credibility of superiors and strengthens employees' trust in managerial decisions (Załoga, 2022, p. 36). A key mechanism of leadership influence is organizational trust, which fosters cooperation, knowledge transfer, and the maintenance of employee engagement.

Crisis situations generate negative psychosocial consequences, such as increased stress, job insecurity, decreased motivation, and weakened cooperation and organizational ties. In such conditions, leadership plays a crucial role in stabilizing employees' emotions, setting directions for action, and aligning organizational goals with team needs. An important mechanism of leader influence is the building of organizational trust, which reduces uncertainty, strengthens engagement, and supports the effective functioning of the enterprise.

Trust is an important component of an organization's social capital and conditions effective cooperation, knowledge transfer, and employee engagement (Sztompka, 2007, p. 69). It forms the foundation of relationships based on predictability of actions, credibility of communication, and a belief in mutual loyalty among organizational members. In the workplace, a high level of trust fosters open communication, facilitates problem-solving, and enhances team innovation. A lack of trust, on the other hand, leads to decreased productivity, increased internal conflicts, limited information flow, and a rise in opportunistic behaviors. A deficit of trust also weakens organizational ties and increases employees' propensity to seek alternative employment, resulting in the loss of valuable knowledge capital (Bryczek-Wróbel, Moszczyński, Załoga, 2025, pp. 86-103).

From a macroeconomic perspective, the consequences of declining trust extend beyond individual enterprises. Employment instability, reduced work efficiency, and decreased innovation negatively affect economic competitiveness and the pace of economic growth. Therefore, building trust within organizations is not only a managerial challenge but also an important element of human capital development policy at the level of the entire economy.

In light of the above considerations, the aim of the article is to analyze the impact of leadership on building trust in crisis situations. Understanding the social and organizational mechanisms that determine the level of trust makes it possible to design effective human capital management strategies and strengthen organizational resilience to future disruptions. Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Transparent communication by the leader positively affects the level of employee trust.

H2: Leader empathy positively affects the level of employee trust.

H3: Consistency of the leader's actions increases the level of organizational trust.

H4: Organizational trust mediates the relationship between leadership and employee engagement.

2. The role of leadership in building trust during a crisis

Leadership in crisis situations differs from management under stable conditions, as it requires operating under high uncertainty, decision-making pressure, and emotional tension. An effective leader then assumes the role of an emotional stabilizer of the organization, combining strategic competencies with social skills such as empathy and communication.

Recent studies indicate that authentic and adaptive leadership are of particular importance in crisis situations. These approaches are based on transparency of actions, consistency of values, and flexible responses to changing environmental conditions (Northouse, 2022, p. 43). A leader's authenticity fosters their perception as credible and predictable, which forms the foundation for building interpersonal trust (Sztompka, 2027, pp. 23-31). Employees are more willing to accept difficult decisions if they perceive them as consistent with the organization's declared values and principles of procedural justice (Blustein, 2019, pp. 236-253). Adaptiveness in leadership, in turn, refers to the ability to modify one's leadership style depending on the dynamics of the crisis, the level of threat, and the needs of employee teams (Yukl, Gardner, 2023, pp. 383-412).

An important mechanism for building trust in crisis remains leadership communication (Northouse, 2022, p. 43). Under conditions of informational uncertainty, employees actively seek reliable sources of knowledge, and a lack of information encourages the spread of rumors and interpersonal tensions (Załoga, 2022, pp. 541-552). Transparent communication encompassing the regular sharing of reliable information, explaining the reasons behind decisions, and openly acknowledging cognitive limitations reduces organizational stress (Blustein, 2019, pp. 236-253). It is emphasized that effective crisis communication is not limited to the transmission of data but also involves addressing the emotions of recipients and creating space for dialogue. Leaders who actively listen to employees and enable them to express concerns strengthen employees' sense of agency (Northouse, 2025, pp. 43-46).

Leadership empathy, understood as the ability to recognize and respond appropriately to employees' emotions, enhances teams' psychological safety. This fosters open communication, cooperation, and increases employees' willingness to take initiative and engage in corrective actions.

Consistency in a leader's actions plays a key role in building trust, while discrepancies between declarations and actual behavior lead to a loss of credibility and an increase in cynical attitudes. Consistency, accountability, and the ethical dimension of leadership strengthen the perceived reliability of the leader, which is particularly important in times of crisis.

From the perspective of human capital, trust-based leadership helps limit talent outflow and the loss of organizational knowledge. Trust strengthens employees' identification with the organization and increases their loyalty to the employer, even under deteriorating economic conditions. Employment stability enables the continuity of organizational processes and reduces the costs of recruitment and onboarding of new employees (Mrówka, 2025, pp. 67-86). Moreover, a high level of trust promotes the sharing of tacit knowledge, enhancing the organization's capacity for learning and adaptation.

From an interdisciplinary perspective, leadership that builds trust serves as a protective mechanism for human capital, limiting the negative effects of economic and organizational crises. Trust stabilizes working relationships, reduces conflicts, and strengthens teamwork, which translates into higher organizational effectiveness. Consequently, leadership competencies in communication, empathy, and accountability become a strategic resource for enterprises operating in turbulent environments.

3. Leadership and human capital – an interdisciplinary perspective

The analysis of the relationship between leadership and human capital requires an interdisciplinary approach integrating insights from economics, management sciences, organizational psychology, and the sociology of work. Contemporary concepts of organizational development indicate that human capital is not merely the sum of employees' competencies, but a dynamic resource encompassing knowledge, skills, experience, mental health, and the ability to cooperate. In conditions of increasing economic uncertainty, the quality of this resource determines enterprises' capacity to adapt and maintain a competitive advantage. Leadership, in turn, serves as a mechanism that integrates individual potential with organizational goals, influencing the effective utilization of human resources (Northouse, 2022, pp. 43-63).

From the perspective of institutional economics, trust reduces transaction costs, improves coordination of activities, and accelerates decision-making processes. It also promotes the effective use of human capital, increases the willingness to cooperate and share knowledge, and reduces employee turnover costs.

Organizational psychology emphasizes that leadership based on empathy, emotional support, and the creation of psychological safety fosters employee well-being, reduces stress, and prevents burnout. A trust-based environment enhances motivation, creativity, and employee resilience, which is particularly important in times of crisis.

From a management science perspective, leadership is a tool for shaping an organizational culture based on cooperation, accountability, and shared values. Leaders influence organizational norms by modeling desired attitudes and behaviors among employees. Consistency between the values declared by management and actual managerial practices strengthens employees' identification with the organization and builds long-term engagement. Contemporary management concepts also highlight the importance of inclusive leadership, which strengthens the sense of belonging and enables fuller utilization of the potential of diverse teams. Such an approach fosters a work environment based on mutual respect and trust.

The sociology of work, in turn, indicates that leadership influences the quality of social relations within an organization, affecting the level of social capital. Strong social ties and a high level of trust promote cooperation, reduce interpersonal conflicts, and strengthen employee solidarity (Blustein, 2019, pp. 236-253). In times of crisis, the importance of social capital increases, as it enables the mobilization of organizational resources and more effective coping with uncertainty. Leadership based on dialogue and employee participation supports the development of a sense of community and increases acceptance of difficult restructuring decisions.

An interdisciplinary perspective makes it possible to see that the impact of leadership on human capital extends beyond the boundaries of a single enterprise. Employment stability, the quality of work relations, and the level of organizational trust influence the functioning of the labor market and the condition of entire economic sectors (Mrówka, 2025, pp. 67-86). Organizations that develop leadership competencies conducive to building trust demonstrate greater resilience to economic shocks and adapt more quickly to technological changes. Consequently, leadership becomes one of the key factors strengthening the sustainability of knowledge-based economic systems.

Contemporary research also confirms that investing in the development of leadership competencies is an important element of human capital management strategies. Developing communication skills, emotional intelligence, and the ability to build a culture of trust increases team effectiveness and improves long-term organizational performance. Leadership that fosters cooperation stimulates organizational learning processes, strengthens knowledge transfer, and enhances enterprises' capacity for innovation (Yukl, Gardner, 2023, pp. 383-412). Thus, leadership competencies should be treated as a strategic intangible resource determining the pace of development of modern organizations and economies.

4. Discussion of results

The empirical study was conducted using a diagnostic survey method with the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) technique. The research sample was purposive and included 300 leaders from medium and large enterprises operating in Poland under conditions of increased market uncertainty.

In the sample structure, 58% were men and 42% were women, while the average managerial tenure was 8.6 years. Respondents represented the manufacturing sector (34%), services (41%), and IT (25%).

The research instrument was a questionnaire consisting of 25 items measured on a Likert scale (1-5). The following variables were analyzed: leadership communication, leader empathy, consistency of actions, organizational trust, and employee engagement.

Data analysis employed Pearson's correlation coefficient, linear regression analysis, and mediation analysis.

Significant positive relationships were found between the analyzed variables.

Table 1.
Correlation Matrix (r Pearsona)

Predictor	Communication	Empathy	Consistency	Trust	Engagement
Communication	1,00	0,54	0,57	0,62	0,48
Empathy	0,54	1,00	0,52	0,58	0,46
Consistency	0,57	0,52	1,00	0,65	0,51
Trust	0,62	0,58	0,65	1,00	0,60
Engagement	0,48	0,46	0,51	0,60	1,00

Note. All correlation coefficients are statistically significant at the level of $p < 0.01$.

Source: own elaboration based on the author's research.

All correlation coefficients are statistically significant at the level of $p < 0.01$. Table 1 presents the relationship between leadership communication and the level of employee trust. The obtained results indicate significant positive relationships between the analyzed variables, particularly between communication, empathy, and consistency of the leader's actions and the level of organizational trust. These findings provide preliminary support for hypotheses H1, H2, and H3.

Table 2.
Results of linear regression (dependent variable: trust)

Predictor	β	b	SE	t	p
Communication	0,31	0,42	0,08	5,25	<0,001
Empathy	0,27	0,35	0,07	4,89	<0,001
Consistency	0,38	0,49	0,09	5,67	<0,001

Note. The regression model is statistically significant ($F = 108.3$; $p < 0.001$), and the coefficient of determination is $R^2 = 0.52$.

Source: own elaboration based on the author's research.

The regression model is statistically significant ($F = 108.3$; $p < 0.001$), and the coefficient of determination is $R^2 = 0.52$. The strongest predictor of trust was the consistency of the leader's actions. The results of the regression analysis indicate that communication ($\beta = 0.31$; $p < 0.001$), empathy ($\beta = 0.27$; $p < 0.001$), and consistency of the leader's actions ($\beta = 0.38$; $p < 0.001$) are significant predictors of organizational trust. The strongest effect was observed for the consistency of the leader's actions. These results support the acceptance of hypotheses H1, H2, and H3.

Table 2a.
Results of linear regression (dependent variable: engagement)

Predictor	β	b	SE	t	p
Communication	0,12	0,15	0,07	2,10	0,036
Empathy	0,10	0,13	0,06	1,95	0,052
Consistency	0,15	0,18	0,08	2,25	0,025

Note. The regression model is statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.61$; $F = 118.4$; $p < 0.001$).

Source: own elaboration based on the author's research.

The regression model is statistically significant ($R^2 = 0.61$; $F = 118.4$; $p < 0.001$). The results of the regression analysis indicate that organizational trust is the strongest predictor of employee engagement ($\beta = 0.52$; $p < 0.001$). At the same time, the influence of leadership variables weakens, which suggests their indirect effect through trust. These findings provide a basis for further mediation analysis.

Table 3.
Mediation analysis using bootstrapping (5,000 samples)

Efekt	β	SE	95% CI	p
Direct effect (c′)	0,29	0,07	[0,15; 0,43]	<0,001
Indirect effect (a × b)	0,18	0,05	[0,09; 0,28]	<0,001
Total effect (c)	0,47	0,08	[0,32; 0,62]	<0,001

Note. The indirect effect was considered statistically significant because the 95% confidence interval (CI) does not include zero.

Source: own elaboration based on the author's research.

The indirect effect was considered statistically significant because the 95% confidence interval (CI) does not include zero. The results of the mediation analysis confirm the significance of the indirect effect ($\beta = 0.18$; 95% CI [0.09; 0.28]), indicating the mediating role of organizational trust in the relationship between leadership and employee engagement. At the same time, the significance of the direct effect ($\beta = 0.29$; $p < 0.001$) points to partial mediation. These findings support the acceptance of hypothesis H4.

The conducted empirical analysis allowed for the verification of all formulated research hypotheses. Hypotheses H1–H3, concerning the impact of leadership styles on organizational trust, were confirmed in the regression analysis, while hypothesis H4, regarding the mediating role of trust, was confirmed in the mediation analysis.

The obtained results confirm the validity of the adopted theoretical assumptions and align with contemporary research on organizational leadership and human capital management under conditions of uncertainty. The observed relationships indicate that leadership competencies oriented toward transparent communication, empathy, and responsible decision-making contribute to strengthening organizational trust, which serves as a key mechanism stabilizing employee behavior in crisis situations. This means that the effectiveness of leaders' actions extends beyond the operational dimension of management and includes shaping a work environment conducive to psychosocial safety and team cohesion.

The findings correspond with literature emphasizing the importance of authenticity and the ethical dimension of leadership as determinants of leader credibility. It was also confirmed that organizational trust fosters increased employee engagement, reduces turnover intentions, and strengthens identification with the organization, which is crucial for maintaining the continuity of enterprise operations. It can therefore be concluded that values-based leadership is an important factor in minimizing the risk of work disorganization during periods of economic instability.

From a strategic management perspective, the results indicate that trust should be treated as an intangible resource that enhances organizational resilience. This mechanism plays a particularly important role under conditions of market disruption, when traditional control instruments prove insufficient. A high level of trust reduces coordination costs, supports knowledge exchange, and enables faster implementation of adaptive actions. In this sense, trust can be interpreted as a factor that increases organizational flexibility, facilitates more efficient responses to environmental changes, and shortens decision-making time.

The literature also emphasizes that social resilience to informational threats and destabilizing external influences is strongly linked to the level of trust and the cohesion of social relations. These mechanisms are also reflected in the organizational environment, where trust constitutes the foundation for effective cooperation and adaptation to changing conditions. This means that organizations characterized by high levels of trust demonstrate greater capacity to absorb shocks and maintain the stability of management processes despite environmental pressures.

From a psychological perspective, the results confirm the importance of psychological safety as a factor reducing occupational stress and strengthening employees' willingness to take initiative. A trust-based organizational environment fosters open communication and teamwork, which enhances the organization's ability to generate innovative solutions under pressure. Thus, psychological safety can be seen as a catalyst for organizational learning processes, supporting creativity and experimentation even under unfavorable conditions.

The analysis also points to significant macroeconomic implications. The stabilization of human capital within enterprises translates into reduced employment fluctuations, increased productivity, and strengthened competitiveness of economic sectors. Therefore, leadership focused on building trust can be seen as a factor supporting the resilience of economic systems to crisis shocks. Organizational trust reduces the social costs of economic crises, such as structural unemployment, labor market inactivity, and the loss of employee competencies.

The findings also highlight the need to redefine the role of leaders in organizations operating in turbulent environments. Leadership is no longer merely a supervisory function but becomes a process of social influence aimed at building relationships based on credibility, responsibility, and mutual respect. Leaders act as moderators of collective emotions, architects of organizational culture, and integrators of human resources, which increases the importance of soft skills in management structures.

At the same time, it should be emphasized that the results should be interpreted with consideration of methodological limitations. The declarative nature of survey data may lead to subjective assessments of supervisors' behaviors and distortions resulting from the tendency to provide socially desirable responses. Another limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the study, which does not allow for a clear determination of the durability of the observed relationships over time.

Future research should consider the use of mixed methods, including organizational observations, case studies, and longitudinal analyses enabling the assessment of changes in trust levels over time. It would also be valuable to expand the analysis to include contextual variables such as organizational culture, industry, level of digitalization, and cross-cultural conditions. This would allow for a more comprehensive explanation of the mechanisms through which leadership influences the stabilization of human capital across different types of organizations and environmental conditions.

5. Summary

The conducted analysis confirms that leadership plays a fundamental role in shaping mechanisms for protecting human capital in crisis conditions, constituting one of the key factors stabilizing the functioning of modern organizations. In situations of increased economic and organizational uncertainty, leaders act as integrators of human resources, coordinators of adaptive processes, and moderators of psychosocial tensions arising in the workplace. Their actions influence not only the operational efficiency of enterprises but also the quality of social relations, the level of employee engagement, and the durability of organizational structures.

The findings indicate that organizational trust is a central mediating mechanism between leadership and the effectiveness of human capital utilization. Leadership based on decision-making transparency, axiological consistency, accountability, and empathy fosters the strengthening of organizational ties and limits the negative effects of crises, such as work disorganization, decreased motivation, and increased employee turnover. Trust reduces the perceived risk of operating in uncertain environments, supports the acceptance of difficult managerial decisions, and enhances employees' willingness to cooperate and engage in adaptive actions.

An interdisciplinary research perspective shows that the impact of leadership on human capital extends beyond the level of a single organization. The economic significance of trust is reflected in reduced transaction costs and increased efficiency in resource allocation, while its psychological dimension includes strengthening employee well-being and resilience to occupational stress. From a management perspective, leadership serves as an instrument for shaping an organizational culture that promotes cooperation, learning, and innovation. Thus, leadership competencies should be viewed as a strategic intangible resource determining the sustainability and competitiveness of enterprises in turbulent environments.

The analysis also indicates that effective leadership in crisis situations helps limit the loss of organizational knowledge and stabilizes employment, which is crucial for maintaining the continuity of operational processes. A high level of trust strengthens employees' identification with the organization, increases their loyalty, and sustains motivation to achieve strategic goals despite unfavorable external conditions. Consequently, leadership focused on building trust becomes a significant factor enhancing organizational resilience and the long-term development capacity of enterprises.

In conclusion, leadership should be treated as a key determinant of the quality of human capital and the socio-economic stability of organizations operating under crisis conditions. Developing leadership competencies in communication, employee emotion management, building a culture of trust, and responsible decision-making should constitute an integral part of human capital management strategies. In the context of increasing environmental volatility, the ability to build organizational trust becomes not only a managerial challenge but also a prerequisite for the sustainability and competitiveness of modern enterprises and knowledge-based economies.

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