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VALUE-BASED LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION IN CENTRAL EUROPEAN SMALL ENTERPRISES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HUNGARIAN, SLOVAK, AND AUSTRIAN SMES

Abstract

This study examines the impact of value-based leadership on employee motivation in small enterprises across three Central European countries: Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria. Through a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with ten diverse small enterprises, this research explores how ethical principles and organizational values embedded in leadership practices influence employee engagement, commitment, and performance. The findings reveal that value-based leadership significantly enhances employee motivation through mechanisms of ethical climate creation, psychological empowerment, and authentic leader-follower relationships [1]. Results indicate that while regional variations exist, value-based leadership universally promotes higher employee engagement, reduced turnover intentions, and improved organizational performance across all three countries [2]. The study contributes to leadership theory by demonstrating the effectiveness of value-based approaches in resource-constrained SME contexts and provides practical implications for SME leaders seeking sustainable competitive advantage through human capital development [3].

Keywords: value-based leadership, employee motivation, small enterprises, Central Europe, ethical leadership, organizational values, SME management

1. Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) constitute the backbone of Central European economies, accounting for over 99% of all businesses and employing approximately 70% of the workforce in the region [4] [40]. In Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria, SMEs face unique challenges including resource constraints, competitive labor markets, and the need to attract and retain talented employees in an era of increasing worker mobility [5]. Unlike large corporations with formal structures and extensive resources, SMEs depend heavily on leadership quality and organizational culture to motivate employees and drive performance [1].

Value-based leadership, characterized by ethical principles, transparent communication, and alignment between organizational values and leader behavior, has emerged as a critical factor in organizational success [3]. This leadership approach emphasizes moral integrity, stakeholder consideration, and the creation of meaning-centered work environments [6]. For SMEs operating with limited formal systems, value-based leadership becomes particularly salient as it directly shapes organizational climate, employee motivation, and performance outcomes [2].

Employee motivation in SMEs differs fundamentally from motivation dynamics in large organizations. Research indicates that in smaller enterprises, direct leader-employee relationships, perceived organizational support, and value congruence play more significant roles than formal incentive systems [7]. Central European SMEs, with their distinct historical, cultural, and economic contexts, present a unique setting for examining how value-based leadership influences employee motivation [8] [41], [42].

Despite extensive research on leadership and motivation, several gaps persist. First, most studies focus on large organizations or Western contexts, with limited attention to Central European SMEs [4]. Second, cross-national comparative research examining value-based leadership across culturally proximate, yet distinct countries remain sparse [8]. Third, the mechanisms through which value-based leadership translate into employee motivation in resource-constrained settings require further exploration [2].

This study addresses these gaps by investigating: (1) How do value-based leadership practices influence employee motivation in Hungarian, Slovak, and Austrian small enterprises? (2) What similarities and differences exist in value-based leadership implementation across these three countries? (3) Through what mechanisms does value-based leadership enhance employee motivation in SME contexts?

The research contributes theoretically by extending value-based leadership theory to Central European SME contexts and practically by providing actionable insights for SME leaders seeking to enhance employee motivation through authentic, values-driven approaches [3].

2. Literature Review

2.1 Value-Based Leadership: Theoretical Foundations

Value-based leadership represents an ethical approach to leadership that prioritizes moral principles, stakeholder interests, and alignment between espoused and enacted values [3]. This leadership paradigm is drawn from ethical leadership theory, which emphasizes leaders as moral persons and moral managers who influence followers through demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct [6]. Value-based leaders articulate clear organizational values, model these values consistently, and create systems that reinforce value-aligned behavior [9].

Research demonstrates that value-based leadership encompasses several key dimensions: ethical decision-making, transparent communication, fairness in treatment, role modeling, and stakeholder consideration [10]. These dimensions collectively create an ethical climate that shapes employee attitudes, behaviors, and motivation [1]. In SME contexts where formal governance mechanisms may be limited, value-based leadership becomes the primary mechanism for establishing organizational culture and guiding employee behavior [3].

2.2 Employee Motivation in SMEs

Employee motivation in SMEs differs from motivation in large organizations due to structural, resource, and relational factors [7]. SMEs typically offer closer leader-employee relationships, greater role flexibility, and more direct impact visibility, which can enhance intrinsic motivation [11]. However, they also face challenges including limited career advancement paths, resource constraints, and competitive compensation disadvantages [4].

Research indicates that in SMEs, relational factors, including leadership quality, perceived organizational support, and value congruence—often outweigh extrinsic rewards in determining motivation and retention [12]. Employees in small enterprises seek meaningful work, authentic relationships, and alignment between personal and organizational values [13]. Value-based leadership addresses these motivational needs by creating purpose-driven environments where employees feel valued and aligned with organizational missions [3].

2.3 Leadership and Motivation in Central European Context

Central European countries share historical experiences of economic transition from centrally planned to market economies yet maintain distinct cultural and institutional characteristics [8]. Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria, while geographically and economically

connected, exhibit variations in business culture, leadership norms, and employee expectations [4] [43].

Austrian business culture tends toward formalization, quality emphasis, and structured processes, reflecting Western European influences [4]. Slovak enterprises demonstrate adaptability and openness to contemporary management practices, having undergone rapid economic development [14]. Hungarian SMEs often maintain stronger ties to traditional family-based business models while increasingly recognizing the need for modern leadership approaches [4].

Research on leadership in Central European SMEs remains limited, with most studies focusing on either Western European or Eastern European contexts without distinguishing regional nuances [8]. Understanding how value-based leadership operates across these distinct yet related contexts contribute to more nuanced leadership theory and practice [4].

2.4 Mechanisms Linking Value-Based Leadership to Employee Motivation

Literature identifies several mechanisms through which value-based leadership enhances employee motivation. First, ethical climate creation establishes psychological safety and trust, enabling employees to engage more fully in their work [1]. Second, psychological empowerment occurs when leaders demonstrate respect for employee contributions and involve them in decisions, enhancing intrinsic motivation [15]. Third, value congruence between leaders and employees creates meaningful work experiences that drive engagement and commitment [3].

Research also highlights the mediating role of employee engagement in the leadership-performance relationship [16]. Value-based leaders foster engagement through inspirational communication, individual consideration, and by creating conditions where employees can experience purpose and growth [17]. In SME contexts, where direct leader-employee interaction is frequent, these mechanisms operate with intensity [2].

2.5 Gaps and Research Questions

Existing literature provides strong evidence for value-based leadership effects but leaves important questions unanswered regarding Central European SMEs. How does cultural context moderate value-based leadership effectiveness? What specific leadership practices resonate most strongly with employees in different national contexts? How do resource constraints in SMEs affect the implementation and impact of value-based leadership? This study addresses these questions through comparative analysis across three Central European countries [8].

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative case studies to examine value-based leadership and employee motivation in Central European SMEs [3]. The mixed methodology allows for both breadth through survey data and depth through case analysis, providing comprehensive insights into leadership practices and their effects [18].

3.2 Sample Selection

Ten small enterprises were purposively selected from Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria, ensuring representation across different sectors and organizational characteristics. Selection criteria included: (1) enterprise size between 10-50 employees, (2) operational history of at least three years, (3) willingness to participate in both surveys and interviews, and (4) sector diversity to enhance generalizability [4].

3.3 Data Collection

Quantitative Phase: Structured questionnaires were administered to employees measuring value-based leadership practices, perceived ethical climate, employee motivation, work

engagement, and organizational commitment. Established instruments with demonstrated reliability were utilized [2].

Qualitative Phase: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with organizational leaders and selected employees between March and July 2025 to explore value-based leadership practices, implementation challenges, and perceived impacts on motivation. Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, were conducted in person or via online platforms depending on location and were audio-recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis [3].

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to identify relationships between value-based leadership and employee motivation variables [19]. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis following systematic coding procedures to identify patterns and themes related to values, leadership practices, and motivational mechanisms [18]. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. The study received approval from relevant institutional review boards [3].

4. Results: Ten Company Case Studies

Company 1: AT-TECH-01 (Austria, Technology Sector, 35 employees)

This Austrian software development company exemplifies value-based leadership through transparent communication and innovation-oriented culture. The founder-CEO articulates clear values of creativity, client service excellence, and work-life balance [20]. Employees report high motivation driven by meaningful project work and leadership that provides autonomy while remaining supportive. The company implements flexible working arrangements and invests in continuous learning, reflecting commitment to employee development values [21].

Unique Insight: The emphasis on work-life balance as a core organizational value distinguishes this enterprise, with 92% of employees reporting high job satisfaction directly attributed to leadership's genuine commitment to this value [19].

Company 2: SK-MFG-02 (Slovakia, Manufacturing Sector, 28 employees)

A Slovak precision manufacturing enterprise demonstrates value-based leadership through quality emphasis and employee involvement in problem-solving. The management team, having transitioned from hierarchical to participatory approaches, now regularly seeks employee input on process improvements [14]. Values of craftsmanship, continuous improvement, and mutual respect permeate daily operations [9].

Unique Insight: The deliberate cultural transformation from authoritarian to value-based leadership over five years resulted in 40% reduction in turnover and measurable productivity gains, demonstrating that leadership evolution is possible even in traditional manufacturing contexts [22].

Company 3: HU-SVC-03 (Hungary, Service Sector, 22 employees)

This Hungarian marketing consultancy emphasizes client-centricity and collaborative teamwork as core values. The leadership team models these values through transparent project allocation, equitable profit-sharing, and regular team-building activities [23]. Employees describe feeling "part of something larger" and appreciate the ethical approach to client relationships that sometimes means declining lucrative but misaligned opportunities [3].

Unique Insight: The practice of involving all employees in strategic decisions about which clients to pursue creates strong value alignment and ownership, with employees reporting this participatory approach as primary motivation for staying with the organization [16].

Company 4: AT-RET-04 (Austria, Retail Sector, 45 employees)

An Austrian specialty retail chain demonstrates value-based leadership through customer service excellence and employee empowerment. Store managers have significant autonomy in decision-making, reflecting trust-based leadership [15]. The company invests heavily in product

knowledge training, communicating the value that informed employees provide superior customer experiences [21].

Unique Insight: The co-ownership model, where employees can become partners after three years, structurally embeds stakeholder values and creates alignment between employee motivation and organizational success [3].

Company 5: SK-RET-05 (Slovakia, Technology Sector, 18 employees)

A Slovak e-commerce platform startup exhibits value-based leadership through innovation encouragement and psychological safety. The young leadership team explicitly rejects command-and-control approaches, instead of fostering experimentation and learning from failures [20]. Weekly retrospectives allow open discussion of challenges without blame, creating an environment where employees feel safe to innovate [1].

Unique Insight: The explicit articulation of "productive failure" as a company value transforms typical risk-aversion, with employees reporting increased willingness to propose innovative solutions that might not succeed initially [9].

Company 6: HU-MFG-06 (Hungary, Manufacturing Sector, 32 employees)

A Hungarian food processing enterprise demonstrates value-based leadership through quality commitment and employee welfare. The family-owned business maintains traditional values of product excellence while modernizing employee relations through fair compensation, safe working conditions, and respect for work-life boundaries [4]. Leadership consistently prioritizes employee safety over production targets, building trust and loyalty [13].

Unique Insight: The multi-generational workforce (ages 22-65) presents challenges in value interpretation, but leadership successfully bridges generational differences by emphasizing shared commitment to quality and family-like workplace atmosphere [24] [44].

Company 7: AT-SVC-07 (Austria, Service Sector, 41 employees)

An Austrian engineering consulting firm exemplifies value-based leadership through technical excellence and professional development emphasis. Senior partners mentor junior engineers, embodying the value of knowledge transfer [25]. The firm maintains rigorous quality standards while supporting employees' pursuit of advanced certifications and continuing education [21].

Unique Insight: The formal mentorship program, where every junior employee is paired with a senior mentor, institutionalizes the leadership value of developing people, resulting in exceptional retention rates (95% over three years) despite competitive market conditions [16].

Company 8: SK-SVC-08 (Slovakia, Service Sector, 26 employees)

A Slovak IT services company demonstrates value-based leadership through client partnership and team collaboration values. The leadership team shares financial information transparently, explaining how individual contributions affect company performance [14]. Regular "values check" meetings assess whether company decisions align with stated principles [9].

Unique Insight: The practice of allowing employees to vote on whether to accept potential clients based on values alignment creates extraordinary buy-in, with employees reporting feeling genuine ownership of the company's direction [16].

Company 9: HU-TECH-09 (Hungary, Technology Sector, 29 employees)

A Hungarian software development company demonstrates value-based leadership through innovation, customer success, and social responsibility. The CEO regularly communicates how company work contributes to societal benefit, providing meaning beyond technical tasks [3]. The company donates 5% of profits to education initiatives, operationalizing social responsibility values [26].

Unique Insight: The connection between daily work and broader social impact proves highly

motivating for younger employees (under 35), who report that social responsibility values significantly influence their commitment to the organization [27].

Company 10: AT-MFG-10 (Austria, Manufacturing Sector, 38 employees)

An Austrian precision parts manufacturer demonstrates value-based leadership through sustainability, quality, and employee dignity. The company has invested in environmentally friendly production processes despite higher costs, demonstrating authentic commitment to sustainability values [28]. Leadership treats employees with respect regardless of position, reflected in inclusive communication and decision-making practices [1].

Unique Insight: The environmental sustainability commitment resonates strongly with employees, who report pride in working for an organization whose values align with their personal environmental concerns, illustrating how societal values can enhance workplace motivation [26].

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Despite national differences, remarkable similarities emerge across all ten enterprises. Value-based leadership consistently correlates with higher employee motivation, engagement, and organizational commitment regardless of country or sector [2]. Leaders who authentically model stated values, communicate transparently, and involve employees in meaningful decisions create environments where employees feel motivated and valued [3].

The mechanisms through which value-based leadership enhances motivation prove universal: ethical climate creation fosters psychological safety [1], value congruence provides meaning and purpose [3], and authentic leader-employee relationships build trust and commitment [15]. These mechanisms operate similarly across Hungarian, Slovak, and Austrian contexts, suggesting that fundamental human needs for meaningful work, respectful treatment, and value alignment transcend national boundaries [27]. While similarities dominate, subtle national differences exist. Austrian enterprises demonstrate stronger emphasis on formal systems and quality standards, reflecting Western European business culture influences [4]. Slovak enterprises show greater openness to contemporary management practices and rapid adaptation to new approaches [14]. Hungarian enterprises maintain stronger connections to traditional family business values while increasingly recognizing need for modern leadership approaches [4]. These differences suggest that effective value-based leadership requires cultural contextualization. Leaders must adapt their approach to fit national business cultures while maintaining core principles of ethical behavior, value consistency, and employee consideration [8] [40], [43].

Sector emerges as potentially more influential than nationality in shaping value-based leadership expression. Technology enterprises across all three countries emphasize innovation, autonomy, and flexibility values [20]. Manufacturing enterprises focus on quality, safety, and continuous improvement [4]. Service enterprises prioritize customer-centricity and collaborative teamwork [23]. This sectoral consistency suggests that industry context powerfully shapes appropriate value emphasis and leadership practices [4].

This research advances understanding value-based leadership in several ways. First, it demonstrates that value-based approaches prove effective in resource-constrained SME contexts, where leadership must compensate for limited formal systems through authentic relationships and cultural development [2]. Second, it shows that employee motivation in SMEs depends more heavily on relational and value-based factors than on extrinsic rewards, supporting theories emphasizing meaning and purpose in contemporary work [3]. Third, it reveals that cultural context moderates specific practices while universal principles of ethical leadership transcend national boundaries [8]. For SME leaders in Central Europe, findings suggest several actionable practices:

1. Articulate Clear Values: Explicitly define organizational values and communicate them consistently [9]

2. Model Values Authentically: Demonstrate values through decisions and behaviors, especially during challenging situations [3]

3. Create Participatory Processes: Involve employees in decisions affecting their work, fostering ownership and commitment [16]

4. Invest in Relationships: Prioritize quality leader-employee relationships as primary motivational mechanism [1]

5. Align Systems with Values: Ensure hiring, evaluation, and reward systems reinforce stated values [2]

This study's limitations include the small sample size, cross-sectional design, and reliance on self-reported data. Future research should employ longitudinal designs tracking value-based leadership impact over time, expand sample sizes enabling statistical generalization, and investigate specific mechanisms through which cultural context moderates' leadership effectiveness [8]. Comparative research including additional Central European countries would further enhance understanding of regional patterns [4].

6. Conclusion

Value-based leadership emerges as a crucial and enduring force behind the motivation and engagement of employees in Central European small and medium-sized enterprises. The findings of this comparative research among Hungarian, Slovak, and Austrian firms show that leadership built on shared values can compensate for limited resources and structural constraints typical of SMEs. By integrating ethical awareness, transparency, and human-centered thinking into daily management, leaders create an environment where people find meaning and emotional connection in their work. Motivation is not achieved through control or material incentives alone, but through belonging, respect, and the conviction that one's contribution aligns with a higher organizational purpose.

Across the ten examined enterprises, common patterns demonstrate that value-based leadership translates moral principles into practical routines. Whether through mentoring systems, flexible work structures, transparent decision-making, or social responsibility initiatives, leaders consciously embody values that employees can identify with. In these organizations, communication is open, mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning, and personal integrity is considered the most powerful form of authority. Such practices generate trust, strengthen commitment, and help employees overcome the insecurity often associated with small business environments.

While cultural nuances differentiate Austrian formality, Slovak adaptability, and Hungarian relational leadership, all contexts confirm that ethical consistency is more important than managerial style. Employees respond positively when leaders act predictably, express genuine care, and align their behavior with declared values. The study also reveals that younger generations expect authenticity and purpose, while older employees value fairness and respect—yet both groups are motivated by the same underlying principles of honesty and cooperation. Thus, value-based leadership provides a common ground across generational and cultural divides.

From a strategic perspective, this leadership model enhances not only internal motivation but also organizational resilience. Firms that integrate ethics into their business strategies become more trusted by clients and communities, and more capable of retaining skilled employees even in volatile labor markets. The evidence from Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria demonstrates that values can serve as an economic resource: a stable foundation for innovation, sustainability, and long-term growth.

Ultimately, value-based leadership in small enterprises proves that success is not merely a function of scale or capital, but of credibility and human connection. By aligning what they believe with what they practice, Central European SME leaders transform their workplaces into communities of trust, where motivation is both a moral and a productive force. This synthesis of integrity and performance offers a durable model for leadership in a changing, ethically demanding global economy.

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